WALMARTLAND: MUSIC AND CORPORATE PHILANTHROPY IN NORTHWEST ARKANSAS

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ABSTRACT

Erin C. Pratt: Walmartland: Music and Corporate Philanthropy in Northwest Arkansas
(Under the direction of Michael A. Figueroa)

What does it mean to take Sam Walton's name in vain during a concert sponsored by a philanthropic foundation that bears it proudly? What happens to our image of Beethoven, Great Man among Great Men, when we see him in Walmart's clothing? Using the Walmart-branded spaces of Northwest Arkansas as a crucible, this thesis examines how the interactions of place, history, narrative, and perception affect the aesthetic experience of musical performance. It presents two case studies drawn from two different sorts of concert I attended in Northwest Arkansas, the Walmart home region. The first focuses on a performance by Jason Isbell of his song "The Last of My Kind," which is explicitly critical of Walmart, in a performing venue named for that company. The second analyzes a concert in which first a series of cartoons and then an immediate audience assessment radically reinterpret Beethoven's Sixth Symphony.

To the AR Pratts

PREFACE

In 2014, my family moved from Pennsylvania to Fayetteville, Arkansas while I was attending college in Massachusetts. When I first visited the area during a break from school, I was immediately struck by two things: the rolling farmland dotted with cows that I saw as my plane landed, and the extreme visibility of Walmart. As my father drove me from the airport terminal to a house I had never seen, he pointed out several kinds of Walmarts I had never heard of and began to explain the connection between the presence of Walmart's corporate offices in the region and the impressive rate of development that was visible everywhere I looked. My interest in the geography of this area began with this first introduction to the space.

I spent six weeks in the summer of 2016 living with my family, who had relocated to Cave Springs, AR, while I was working in an internship at Classical Vocal Reprints, a sheet music publisher and distributor located on the rural side of Fayetteville. This longer visit was the occasion on which I first began to notice the cultural scene in the region. I learned that Florence Price's papers were housed at the archive of the University of Arkansas, and I met Barbara Garvey Jackson, the pioneering feminist scholar who is Professor Emerita at the same institution. I also began to note the pervasiveness of Walmart's sponsorship and branding of the region's performing and plastic arts scenes. I took my sister to a festival of new plays at Crystal Bridges and noted with surprise the role of the Walton Foundation, which I had learned was synonymous with Walmart, in sponsoring it. Driving to Crystal Bridges to see one of these plays, we passed the Walmart Arkansas Music Pavilion, the site of the concert I discuss in the first chapter of this thesis; that same summer, I saw advertisements for the Artosphere Festival at the Walton Arts

Center, but chose not to attend. Two years later, I would attend the 2018 version of that festival, which I discuss in the second chapter of this thesis.

My interest in the spaces of Northwest Arkansas and in the music that takes place within them derives from the jarring juxtapositions emergent in both. In the following chapters, I explore many of these juxtapositions, including those between urban and rural space and in the application of neoliberal marketing strategies to musics that construct themselves as anti-commercial, but I also conscientiously replicate them in my choice of case studies. The first chapter of the thesis reads the cultural geography of the region through Jason Isbell's song "The Last of My Kind" and vice versa. The second presents an ethnographic analysis and critical interpretation of the 2018 Artosphere Festival, focusing on a uniquely creative performance of Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony. The two chapters are intentionally disparate in subject and methodology, but they are unified by three factors: (1) the grounding of the analysis in the peculiar locality of Northwest Arkansas, (2) the proximity of the musicians' pretensions of anti-commercialism and their acceptance of Walmart sponsorship, and (3) the idiosyncratic aesthetic readings I am able to draw from the musical texts as a consequence of these first two points. Northwest Arkansas is, I argue, a place where the tacit but omnipresent contradictions of American musical practices under late capitalism develop a powerful and undeniable presence. The following two chapters, from their disparate perspectives, offer brief glimpses at such uncomfortable truths while hinting at the immense musicological interest to be found in Northwest Arkansas.

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INTRODUCTION

When corporate or private benefactors lend their names to the events and venues that they sponsor, they create spaces that invite encounters between their images, their narratives, and those of the artists who appear there. When that benefactor is one as economically powerful, as culturally significant, and as infamous as Walmart, then the elements it brings to that encounter are fraught with meanings, increasing the chances that the reactions they produce upon the addition of their interlocutors' contributions. In Northwest Arkansas, where decades of largesse from the Walton Family Foundation, the philanthropic group named for Walmart founder Sam Walton, has established nationally competitive arts venues, the conditions for such explosive aesthetic reactions become commonplace.

What does it mean to take Sam Walton's name in vain during a concert sponsored by a philanthropic foundation that bears it proudly? What happens to our image of Beethoven, Great Man among Great Men, when we see him in Walmart's clothing? Using the Walmart-branded spaces of Northwest Arkansas as a crucible, this thesis examines how the interactions of place, history, narrative, and perception affect the aesthetic experience of musical performance. It presents two case studies drawn from two different sorts of concert I attended in Northwest Arkansas, the Walmart home region. The first focuses on a performance by Jason Isbell of his song "The Last of My Kind," which is explicitly critical of Walmart, in a performing venue named for that company. The second analyzes a concert in which first a series of cartoons and then an immediate audience assessment radically reinterpret Beethoven's Sixth Symphony.

My experiences of these performances were impacted not only by my prior knowledge of the artists, of concert and genre conventions, of the music itself, but also by my knowledge of Walmart, my awareness of their sponsorship of the events, and my firsthand experience of the indelible mark that the corporation has left on the human geography of the region. The analysis of these experiences demands that I engage with all of these aspects and more, for Walmart shapes the interpretation of works presented in the spaces it brands as its own in an analogous fashion to its shaping the spaces themselves. The sponsorship of Northwest Arkansas' musical life by Walmart, the Walton Foundation, and other affiliated corporate and private entities thus weaves together threads of twenty-first century life that are not often considered at one and the same time. The morass of human geographies, ethical quandaries, value discourses, and musical meanings emergent in these concerts elicits complex aesthetic responses that challenge tacit assumptions about musical practices as well as the capacity of scholarly analytics to encapsulate them. This thesis represents my attempt to grapple with these issues.

Walmart in Scholarly Literature

As one might predict in the case of the world's largest company by revenue, there has been no shortage of scholarly and journalistic literature on Walmart. While a complete review of this literature is beyond the scope of a Master's thesis, I will provide here a brief overview of the major trends in scholarly assessments and critiques of the retailing giant most relevant to my discussion in the following chapters.[1]

Another frequent point of reference for Walmart studies is the relationship between the company's business practices and conservative political and social values. Lichtenstein argues in

[1] For a more complete if dated survey of related literature, see Gary Gereffi and Michelle Christian, "The Impacts of Wal-Mart: The Rise and Consequences of the World's Dominant Retailer," *Annual Review of Sociology* 35 (2009): 573-591.

his 2009 book that Walmart's business model is fundamentally based on the continued presence of conservative, business-friendly laws and legislation, including limited governmental regulation, low minimum wage, and limited union negotiating power.[2] Walmart's expansion after 1980 was driven by the economic policies of conservative presidents like Ronald Reagan; the company's conservative image, Lichtenstein argues, is a fundamental reason that it has struggled to make headway into the metropolitan "home turf" of "local merchants, environmentalists, liberal activists, and labor partisans."[3] Reagan also plays a large role in Bethany Moreton's reading of the company as the most powerful and successful example of Christian free enterprise, an approach to business that marries the social conservatism of populist "Walmart Moms" with the economic policies of the post-Reagan Republican Party.[4]

Two of the more recent book-length studies to deal with Walmart confront a distinctly contemporary anxiety about Walmart: its role in the gathering, dissemination, and application of consumer data. Though earlier books discuss Walmart's role in changing the way businesses gathered and used consumer data, the specific focus on this element as a primary point of investigation reflects the increase in the significance of such data and growing public fear of its misuse. Joseph Turow's book *The Aisles Have Eyes* analyzes the increase of privacy-invading data collection in retail establishments like Walmart as a consequence of the increase in competition between traditional retail establishments and internet-based businesses like

[2] Nelson Lichtenstein, *The Retail Revolution: How Wal-Mart Created a Brave New World of Business* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2009), 7.

[3] Ibid., 7, 9.

[4] Bethany Moreton, *To Serve God and Wal-Mart: The Making of Christian Free Enterprise* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009), 1-5.

Amazon.[5] The third chapter of his book focuses on Walmart's early embrace of data analytics as a means of moving product more efficiently and other retailers' reactions to the threat these sophisticated techniques represented.[6]

Perhaps the most interesting recent book published on Walmart is Jesse LeCavalier's monograph *The Rule of Logistics: Walmart and the Architecture of Fulfillment*, a study of how Walmart and its built environments structure both each other and human activity. Walmart's business model, LeCavalier argues, "relies on narrow margins that must be maintained and improved," and one of the corporation's most powerful and successful means of doing so is their profound commitment to logistics, the industry focused on increasing the efficiency of the everyday tasks necessary for the smooth operation of human life.[7] Due to Walmart's size and economic power, its logistical operations and the business decisions derived from them often have profound effects upon human behavior and the built environments that shape it. LeCavalier's book analyzes many such effects.

Walmart is often read as a model of global capitalism and globalization. Nelson Lichtenstein, a labor historian and one of the most prominent scholars to have studied Walmart, opens his book-length study of the company with a comparison between the growing local economies of Northwest Arkansas and China's Guangdong Province, two hubs of Walmart's global operations.[8] The discussion of Walmart's globalization efforts, which often focuses on China, their largest source of supply chain goods, led in 2011 to the publication of a book of

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[5] Joseph Turow, *The Aisles Have Eyes: How Retailers Track Your Shopping, Strip Your Privacy, and Define Your Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 1-3.

[6] Ibid., 66-106.

[7] Jesse LeCavalier, *The Rule of Logistics: Walmart and the Architecture of Fulfillment* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 12.

[8] Lichtenstein, 1-4.

essays focusing on Walmart in China. These essays consider the impacts of the Walmart supply chain, study the transplantation of its corporate culture, and assess the impact and effect of unionization efforts in Chinese stores.[9] The image of Walmart as global capitalist has significant consequences for its relationship to the locality of Northwest Arkansas, as the remainder of this introduction will show.

In placing my analysis of Walmart squarely within the geography of Northwest Arkansas, I position this thesis within a body of literature focusing on the relationships between global corporations and the specific localities that they call home. The relationship between the Ford Motor Company and Detroit is commonly cited as a point of comparison for studies of Walmart and Northwest Arkansas.[10] Henry Ford's company, as well as General Motors and Chrysler, the two other members of the "Big Three" automobile companies, are closely associated with the city that served as the location for their first factories.[11] These companies are attributed with the rapid growth of the city during the twentieth century—growth spurred in part by the Great Migration of African Americans drawn to the city by the prosperity offered by Ford's integrated workforce—as well as with Detroit's equally rapid decline, symbolized powerfully by its 2013 bankruptcy filings, the largest for a municipal entity in United States history.[12]

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[9] Anita Chan, ed., *Walmart in China* (Ithaca: ILR Press, 2011).

[10] See e.g. LeCavalier, 184.

[11] Bob Ross and Don Mitchell, "Commentary: Neoliberal Landscapes of Deception: Detroit, Ford Field, and the Ford Motor Company," *Urban Geography* 25, no. 7 (2004): 687; Thomas J. Sugrue, "From Motor City to Motor Metropolis: How the Automobile Industry Reshaped Urban America," Automobile in American Life and Society. Accessed April 06, 2019, http://www.autolife.umd.umich.edu/Race/R_Overview/R_Overview.htm.

[12] Sugrue; Beth Tompkins Bates, *The Making of Black Detroit in the Age of Henry Ford* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 2; Monica Davey and Mary Williams Walsh, "Billions in Debt, Detroit Tumbles into Insolvency," The New York Times, July 18, 2013, accessed April 06, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/19/us/detroit-files-for-bankruptcy.html.

Two scholarly articles centering on Ford and Detroit are of direct relevance to this thesis. The first is a commentary by Bob Ross and Don Mitchell that analyzes the football stadium Ford Field as a site in which history, marketing narratives, and landscape combine to reveal some of the ethical contradictions inherent in neoliberal practice.[13] The goals, methods, and impact of this brief article are more similar to those of this project than any other scholarly work I have yet encountered. The second article is Katherine Brucher's work on Ford's use of music and dance as a method of social uplift for his workers living in Detroit.[14] As one of the only projects that aims simultaneously to study music, corporate practice, and urban sites, this article is an important model for this project, although the ultimate goals of our two studies are dissimilar.

Two other studies of corporate and urban interrelations offer different points of comparison for this project. Richard E. Foglesong's *Married to the Mouse* studies the complicated interrelationship of Orlando, Florida and Walt Disney World, applying the metaphor of a marriage—"a relationship characterized alternately by conflict and consensus, individuality and mutual dependence."[15] This model, which imagines city and corporation as individual partners in a fraught but mutually beneficial relationship, provides a useful metaphor that emphasizes the mutual interdependence of the two entities while also maintaining the agency of each partner. Foglesong's impressive analysis is also a valuable inspiration.

Kathryn W. Kemp's work on Asa Candler, the founder of Coca-Cola and Emory University, which are both located in Atlanta, offers yet another point of comparison with the

[13] Ross and Mitchell.

[14] Katherine Brucher, "Assembly Lines and Contra Dance Lines: The Ford Motor Company Music Department and Leisure Reform," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 10, no. 4 (2016).

[15] Richard E. Foglesong, *Married to the Mouse: Walt Disney World and Orlando* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 8.

Walton Family's engagement with Northwest Arkansas.[16] Candler's religious convictions, aggressive business practices, generous philanthropic efforts, and close relationship to his company's hometown of Atlanta are all elements that make Candler an interesting person to compare to Walmart's Sam Walton and his descendants. Other elements of Candler's career, however, including his decision to will even the last of his fortune to philanthropic ends and his participation in civic government—he was inaugurated as mayor of Atlanta in 1917—also offer significant contrasts with the Walton family dynasty's preference to act as private benefactors distributing portions of their fantastic wealth.[17]

There has also been no shortage of literature that deals with Northwest Arkansas and Walmart, often with a particular emphasis on the ways in which the region's economic and social development has been shaped by its most famous corporate citizen, but also how the region has shaped Walmart's practices. Many authors note the fact that Northwest Arkansas is the home of a global corporation but not a major urban center, commenting on and analyzing the peculiarity of this phenomenon. Lichtenstein considers Arkansas to be the "hidden key" to Walmart's success while also acknowledging the tensions between the region's cultural geography and the predatory tactics of big business. He argues that Sam Walton had an impressive "capacity to capitalize upon the social and cultural 'backwardness' of his region in order to build an organization of exceptional flexibility and efficiency. […] In the place of […] governmental regulation, Walmart created a self-contained corporate culture, an ideology of family, faith, and folk communalism that to this day coexists in strange harmony with a Dickensian world of low wages, job insecurity, and pervasive corporate surveillance."

[16] Kathryn W. Kemp, *God's Capitalist: Asa Candler of Coca-Cola* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2002).

[17] Ibid., 292, 221.

Marjorie Rosen's 2009 book *Boom Town,* one of the few book-length studies of Northwest Arkansas, describes the rapid urbanization of Northwest Arkansas as a direct consequence of Walmart's business policies.[18] Her book specifically focuses on the many diverse populations that have been drawn to Northwest Arkansas by the economic and social opportunities afforded or supported by the corporate giant. She ties this diversification directly to Walmart's appointment of Coleman Peterson as the head of their hiring division. Peterson's "mandates were to keep the company's top employees in the fold and to diversify, diversify, diversify. Which he did. Slowly, Bentonville, the tight-knit, white Christian community, started to change. This meant that a variety of well-educated urban types of all ethnicities and religions, often with MBAs or advanced engineering degrees, began migrating to the area."[19] Rosen's documentation of the diversity that is co-constitutive with the urbanization of the region makes her book a valuable resource.

In contrast to the robust literature on Walmart outside of musicology, studies of Walmart and music have been uncommon. Mark A. Fox's 2005 article "Market Power in Music Retailing: The Case of Wal-Mart" remains the primary point of reference for later work such as Elizabeth Barfoot Christian's 2010 book chapter on AC/DC's exclusive distribution deal with the corporation.[20] Fox's article analyzes and critiques Walmart's strategies for the sale of recorded music, which he argues are predatory and endanger traditional music stores.[21] Fox also examines

[18] Marjorie Rosen, *Boom Town: How Wal-Mart Transformed an All-American Town into an International Community* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2009), 2-7.

[19] Rosen, 4.

[20] Mark A. Fox, "Market Power in Music Retailing: The Case of Wal-Mart," *Popular Music and Society* 28, no. 4, 2005; Elizabeth Barfoot Christian, "Highway to Heavenly Profits: The Marriage of AC/DC and Walmart," in *Rock Brands: Selling Sound in a Media Saturated Culture*, ed. Elizabeth Barfoot Christian (Blue Ridge Summit: Lexington Books, 2010), 26-38.

[21] Fox, 503-508.

the implications of Walmart's policy to stock only "family friendly" CDs—i.e., albums that do not carry a "Parental Advisory" sticker.[22] Fox argues that this is a form of censorship that impinges upon artists' creative freedom and the agency of consumers, especially those in rural areas where Walmart may be customers' only source of physical music.[23]

This project differs from Fox's in numerous ways. First and foremost, I deal in this thesis with live music events rather than with recorded music. In these contexts, Walmart acts as a sponsor of the events, not as a distributor of music and related merchandise, a situation that shifts its position relative to the music. Instead of a situation in which its decision to stock an album has such profound economic consequences on the artists' success that it forces them to alter their musical behavior, Walmart's sponsorship of live performance places its name over an event, increasing its identification with the product itself while decreasing the artists' reliance on it. In my case studies, Walmart is not an essential marketplace for the sale of music, but one sponsor—if one with particularly deep pockets—among many. My emphasis on live music making also results in an emphasis on the places where music is being consumed that emerges in Fox's work only through reference to Walmart's importance in rural markets.[24]

While the specter of censorship continues to play a significant role in my analyses of the concerts, particularly in Chapter 1, it is not one of my primary preoccupations. Flows of money are extremely important to both my and Fox's engagements with Walmart and music, but our different contexts necessitate that we view those flows in different ways. While Fox characterizes Walmart's decision to sell CDs at below cost as a contemptible practice verging on predatory pricing, my reading of Walmart's subsidization of concert tickets in Chapter 2

[22] Ibid., 508.

[23] Ibid., 511-512.

[24] Ibid., 513-514.

interprets this choice as a net positive, albeit one to be regarded with suspicion.[25] Perhaps the most significant difference between my approach and Fox's, however, is that my ultimate goal is not to critique Walmart's practices, but rather to develop a hermeneutical approach to analyze how Walmart's narratives, practices, and philanthropic giving interact with the spaces of Northwest Arkansas and the histories of the performers and works presented there.

Goals and Methods

This thesis is structured in two chapters, each of which presents one case study that analyzes a musical performance. Chapter 1 analyzes a performance of Jason Isbell's "The Last of My Kind," placing it within the geography of Northwest Arkansas, within the genre negotiations of the Outlaw Music Festival, and within larger economic and cultural discourses that enter the sphere of the performance through the branding of the venue in which the performance took place—the Walmart Arkansas Music Pavilion. Chapter 2 centers on a performance of Beethoven's Sixth Symphony that occurred during the 2018 Artosphere Music Festival. I argue that this performance, which featured live cartoon animation by Grégoire Pont that brought original narrative and thematic material into discussion with the work, acts at once as a spectacle that works to sanitize Walmart's public image and as a powerful critique of the very practices that made the performance happen.

In order to analyze the performances at the center of this inquiry, I have worked to apply diverse intellectual resources to their description and analysis. Many of these techniques are new to me, while others emerged unexpectedly in my methodology in response to the demands of the material. Participant-observation ethnography provided the basis for many parts of the thesis, including my discussion of the geography of Northwest Arkansas in Chapter 1; my discussion

[25] Ibid., 505-508.

and analysis of the Artosphere Festival in Chapter 2; and my discussion of the concerts appearing in each chapter. Chapter 1 utilizes techniques of musical analysis while also engaging with literature from geography, urban studies, and architecture. Chapter 2 draws on work by scholars working in fields as diverse as Beethoven studies, sociology, ecocriticism, cartoon music studies, and anthropology. Both chapters ground these disparate points of reference in moments of performance, which are themselves related through ethnographic description, reflection, and hermeneutic interpretation.

The ethnographic portions of this thesis are drawn from three visits to Northwest Arkansas. The first, during July of 2017, included my attending the Outlaw Music Festival at the Walmart Arkansas Music Pavilion in Rogers. My engagement with the event was primarily as an observer, as at the time I had no plans to study either it or Northwest Arkansas. Upon developing a research interest in the area as part of Michael Figueroa's seminar on Urban Ethnomusicology in the Spring semester of 2018, I undertook a second excursion to Northwest Arkansas, this one specifically intended as ethnographic fieldwork. During this trip, in March of 2018, I focused on documenting my experience of the spaces of the region, and particularly those spaces where interstices between urban and rural signifiers are prominently visible. My trip included visits to downtown Bentonville, downtown Fayetteville, the Walmart Museum, and Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, where I viewed the main gallery, a temporary exhibition of art from the Black Power movement, and a small portion of the museum's outdoor spaces.

The final ethnographic fieldwork performed as part of the research for this thesis occurred in June of 2018. I spent approximately a week in the area and attended many of the events held as part of the Artosphere Festival. I attended the festival's two mainstage orchestra concerts in the Walton Arts Center, the chamber music concert centered on Roberto Diaz and the

Dover Quartet in the Great Hall of Crystal Bridges, and one complex of Off the Grid performances that occurred around downtown Fayetteville. In the case of events that occurred as part of the festival before I arrived in the region, I found alternative means to study them. I listened to the Mozart in the Museum chamber orchestra concert remotely through its broadcast over the KUAF radio station, which was available online. I asked my father, Edward Pratt Jr., to attend a Trail Mix event at Crystal Bridges and to take photos and videos of what he saw there. After I arrived in Arkansas, I informally interviewed him about the event.

During both of my ethnographic visits to Northwest Arkansas, my impression of the area was dramatically shaped by the experience of driving through the region. The contrast between rolling fields, strip malls and shopping centers of various age and quality, and housing developments representing dramatically different income levels and degrees of completeness left an indelible impact on my understanding of the region. Even the shapes and states of the roads themselves impacted my experience, as wide, modern highways lead into narrow, winding country roads, one-lane bridges, or lightly-travelled streets that provide stunning views of multi-million-dollar ranch homes. Despite their importance, I found these experiences difficult to quantify and write about—I could hardly take notes or photographs from the driver's seat. A first attempt at writing about these experiences appears in Chapter 1 of the thesis.

CHAPTER ONE

"I'm a Long Long Way from [Here]": Hearing Jason Isbell's "The Last of My Kind" in Northwest Arkansas

"I was trying to understand the minds of folks who feel like they don't belong in the universal city that we sort of all wound up in."[26] This was Jason Isbell's reply when journalist Matt Hendrickson asked him for insight on his motivations for writing the song "The Last of My Kind." The song, from Isbell's 2017 album *The Nashville Sound*, imagines the state of mind of a rural-to-urban migrant who feels that his rural origins leave him alienated from his new environment. Among the song's most poignant characteristics is its depiction of the rural space from which the speaker came—a space that the song explicitly identifies with Arkansas—as lost to the past, plowed over to make room for Walmart parking lots. The speaker is thus metaphysically homeless, stranded in the "universal city" that has replaced the world he knew.

This chapter aims to complicate Isbell's statement about the song by positioning it against the geography of one place in which I saw it performed live: Northwest Arkansas, the Walmart home region. Hearing "The Last of My Kind" in one of the settings it describes highlights both the peculiar geography of that region and the pretensions of both the song and the Americana genre. Northwest Arkansas' peculiar geography, which I read as an index of urbanity and rurality and of local specificity and global capitalism, inevitably offers a more complex vision of twenty-first century life than does the song. However, the song expresses a number of

[26] Jason Isbell, interview by Matt Hendrickson, *Garden and Gun*, June/July, 2017, http://gardenandgun.com/feature/jason-isbell-music-city-maverick/.

commonly-held beliefs about modern American cultural geography that themselves play a role in constructing Northwest Arkansas as a locality. This chapter reveals the contradictions inherent in both worldviews through an analysis of the collision of these two contrasting visions during the performance of the song in an amphitheater named for the very entity the song blames for urbanization.

The Cultural Geography of Northwest Arkansas

The northwest region of Arkansas is among the most developed parts of the state, a status that is owed in part to the location of the University of Arkansas in Fayetteville, but primarily to the location of Walmart's corporate headquarters in Bentonville.[27] The presence of both Walmart's main office and the branch offices of the nearly 1,500 vendors that aimed to be better able to service the retailing giant has several implications for the surrounding community. The tax income of Bentonville and its surrounding areas is very high, allowing many public works projects to be undertaken.[28]

Any casual walk around Bentonville, with its integrated civic branding and beautifying projects marked by the "Bentonville B," will attest to the highly visible nature of such public works (Figure 1.1).

[27] Oliver Staley, "Walmart is famous for wrecking small towns. Here's the amazing one it built," *Quartz* (2017), https://qz.com/999040/walmart-is-famous-for-destroying-small-towns-heres-the-amazing-one-it-built/.

[28] Staff of the City Wire, "Walmart influences continue to push rapid growth in Bentonville," *Talk Business and Politics* (2014), https://talkbusiness.net/2014/03/walmart-influences-continue-to-push-rapid-growth-in-bentonville/.

Figure 1.1 One instance of the "Bentonville B," not far from the downtown square.

Bentonville's Parks and Recreation Department is also extraordinarily well-funded, with large, carefully maintained facilities.[29] The Bentonville Community Center, also operated by the Parks and Recreation Department, encompasses a gym with state-of-the-art digitally integrated equipment, a basketball gymnasium with walking track, a small branch of the public library, and an entire indoor water park and natatorium, despite charging membership fees lower than most standard gym memberships.[30] Beyond the implicit relationship between the local government's

[29] "Bentonville Parks and Recreation," https://bentonvillear.com/350/Parks-Recreation.

[30] "Bentonville Community Center," https://bentonvillear.com/359/Community-Center.

income and the high taxes paid by its most famous corporate citizen, Walmart also emerges frequently in less conspicuous ways, including on signs recognizing various sub-entities that have "adopted" various parts of Bentonville, including parks, roads, and trails (Figure 1.2).

Figure 1.2 A road sign near a public park indicating "adoption" by a Walmart-affiliated group.

Bentonville also features several museums: the Walmart Museum, of course, but also Crystal Bridges, a museum of American art that prides itself on its ability to juxtapose its provincial Ozarks location with signifiers of urbane sophistication like high-quality exhibits and conspicuously beautiful architecture that is a feat of engineering.[31] For instance, an exhibit on the

[31] "Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art," https://crystalbridges.org/. For a discussion of Crystal Bridges' architecture, see LeCavalier, 199-206.

construction of the museum that was on display when I visited the museum in March of 2018 opened with the question, "How did a major American art museum emerge in the middle of an Ozark forest?" Here, Walmart's influence makes itself indiscreetly known. The museum, as its promotional materials repeatedly remind visitors, was the brainchild of Alice Walton—daughter of Walmart founder Sam Walton—and the museum is managed by the board of directors of the Walton Foundation, Walmart's philanthropic affiliate.[32] The Walton foundation also remains an important sponsor of the museum, and general admission is fully sponsored by Walmart, a fact that large signs on the way to the exhibits proclaim (Figure 1.3).

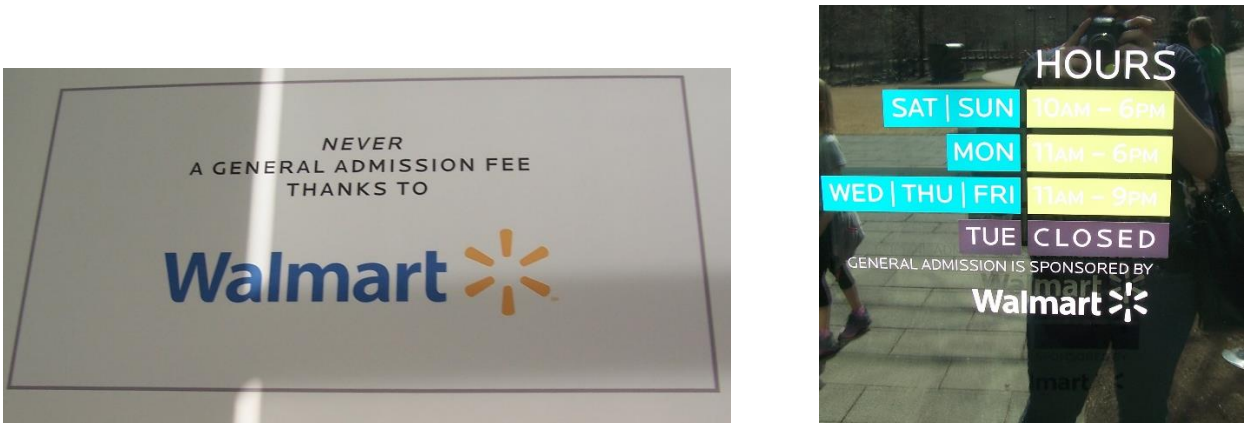

Figure 1.3 Two signs advertising Walmart's sponsorship of general admission at Crystal Bridges.

The outdoor space of the museum is also literally inscribed with the names of both Walmart and the Walton Foundation; both entities appear on benches of the small amphitheater overlooking the museum's reflecting pool and receive pride of place at the very beginning of the lists (Figure 1.4).

[32] "About Crystal Bridges," Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, https://crystalbridges.org/about/.

Figure 1.4 Walmart and the Walton Family inscribed on the Crystal Bridges amphitheater, as seen from across the reflecting pool (above) and from the center of the amphitheater (below).

Walmart's branding of spaces with high public visibility and the implicit connections between their business in the region and the purchasing power of Bentonville's civil service divisions work to reinforce positive associations with the company in the minds of their neighbors in the region.

Meanwhile, the performing arts scene of Northwest Arkansas is concentrated forty minutes away in Fayetteville, the university town. The Walton Arts center, named for founding and supporting donors associated with the Walton Foundation, is a performing arts venue that puts on shows by dance troupes, Broadway touring companies, orchestras, and other large-scale performing ensembles.[33] TheaterSquared, the local professional theater company also based in Fayetteville, is currently constructing a new building (supported by donations by the Walton Foundation) at an estimated cost of 31.5 million dollars.[34] Meanwhile, touring popular musicians of national stature visiting Arkansas typically perform in an amphitheater-style venue located in Rogers, approximately halfway between Bentonville and Fayetteville, where space for parking and hotels is plentiful. This is the Walmart Arkansas Music Pavilion—or, for short, the Walmart AMP, the venue in which the concert this chapter centers on took place.[35] The support that Walmart and the region's other local global corporations offer to the performing arts, like their branded funding of Crystal Bridges, is a means by which they foster goodwill amongst Northwest Arkansas' population. To attend a performance, visit a museum, or play in a park in the region is to engage with a highly sophisticated marketing scheme. To live in Northwest Arkansas is to live in a Walmart advertisement.

Another consequence of Walmart's largesse has been the gradual and still incomplete urbanization of the region. The looming presence of the corporate element grants the region many characteristics of the twenty-first century city, including gentrification, income inequality,

[33] "Walton Arts Center," https://waltonartscenter.org/.

[34] "TheaterSquared," https://www.theatre2.org/; Jennifer Joyner, "TheaterSquared reveals design for new Fayetteville venue," *Talk Business and Politics* (2016), https://talkbusiness.net/2016/11/theatresquared-reveals-design-for-new-fayetteville-venue/.

[35] "Walmart AMP," Walton Arts Center, https://waltonartscenter.org/AMP/.

and a bustling, privately supported, and broadly accessible cultural scene.[36] It is only relatively recently, however, that this status has been achieved: thanks to Walmart's influence, Northwest Arkansas has become one of the fastest growing metropolitan areas in the country.[37] The rapidity of the urbanization process and the large area encompassed in the phrase "Northwest Arkansas" has led to a situation in which the area's many remaining rural spaces coexist with the markers and processes of urbanizing development.

The experience that most clearly illustrates the interstices between urbanizing development and the continued existence of spaces marked as rural is the act of driving through the region. The system of roads and highways connecting Bentonville and Fayetteville, as well as the smaller communities between them, is under constant construction for improvements and expansions.[38] And yet, even amidst all this development, many of the exits from those highways lead into farmland. The exit from Interstate 49 onto Monroe Avenue, a common pathway to the regional airport, illustrates these juxtapositions.

Immediately upon entering Monroe Avenue, which at this point is a five-lane intersection designed to handle intense rush-hour traffic from commuters returning from jobs in Bentonville or Fayetteville, a driver encounters two large competing truck stops. Continuing towards the airport, the road narrows to two lanes made of pothole-prone asphalt. On the left-hand side of the road, across from an agricultural supply center, the driver passes an office park for a bank and wealth management center, as well as Flip Side, a ninja gym. Just beyond these establishments

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[36] Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*, Second ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 3-4, 9.

[37] Jeff Della Rosa, "Northwest Arkansas Leads Growth in State, 14th Fastest-growing Metro Area Nationwide," Talk Business & Politics, March 22, 2018, Accessed March 12, 2019, https://talkbusiness.net/2018/03/northwest-arkansas-leads-growth-in-state-14th-fastest-growing-metro-area-nationwide/.

[38] See for instance Connecting Arkansas Program, "I-49: Washington/Benton County," https://connectingarkansasprogram.com/corridors/5/i-49-washington-benton-county/#.WuzE3IjwbIV.

are active farms and empty lots still bearing the evidence of previous agricultural function. Further down the road are several middle- to upper-middle-class housing developments, many of which are still in the process of filling empty lots with homes to meet the ballooning demand for single-family suburban homes.[39] This site thus brings together institutions that symbolize productivist rural spaces (the farm, the agricultural supply center) and ones that reflect white-collar labor and expensive, exoticized leisure activities that reflect a more urbanized lifestyle (the office park and the ninja gym, respectively). Though Monroe Avenue is unique in its details, it is representative in its general presentation of juxtaposed spaces and implied lifestyle practices.

Northwest Arkansas' remaining rural spaces often abut brand-new shopping centers or housing developments that are still under construction. The interstices between developed and undeveloped land—and between vastly different income levels—are often clear. Another powerful symbol of this phenomenon is at the Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport, located in Cave Springs. The airport is conspicuously small and contains only one terminal. However, its amenities are of a high quality, and despite the already significant amount of available parking relative to the number of active flight paths, the airport is in the process of constructing a new 35 million dollar multi-level parking garage.[40] And yet one only needs to look out the window to see cows grazing just beyond the runway (Figure 1.5). This juxtaposition symbolizes the proximity of technological and monetary development and agricultural space in this portion of Arkansas.

[39] Google Maps' satellite and street view offers a useful and accessible illustration of this site; see the following link, which centers on the office park. https://www.google.com/maps/place/Arvest+Wealth+Management/@36.2552719,-94.1572674,287a,35y,212.13h,44.94t/data=!3m1!1e3!4m5!3m4!1s0x87c9138c944ab339:0x39e3e1c07d764e1d!8m2!3d36.253303!4d-94.1580147

[40] Shawnya Meyers, "XNA Reveals Plans for Parking Garage," *5 News* (2016), http://5newsonline.com/2016/12/15/xna-reveals-plans-for-parking-garage/.

Figure 1.5 The cows near Northwest Arkansas Regional Airport, as seen from a terminal window.

In summary, Northwest Arkansas exhibits many of the characteristics associated with postindustrial rural and suburban spaces. Livestock populates rolling pastures opposite single-family housing developments. Agricultural supply centers share shopping plazas with department stores. A privately-owned vehicle is a practical necessity to navigate the region's rich but geographically diffuse offerings of services and activities. Walmart's and the Walton Foundation's roles in this development would be difficult to overstate, but their motivations for the decisions they have made are unclear. Many residents of Northwest Arkansas suspect that Walmart's efforts have been undertaken in large part to make the region more appealing to its business partners and shareholders, whom it invites for the annual shareholders' meeting.[41] The corporation appears to enact these projects in part to increase goodwill with the inhabitants of its home region, and thus to help it maintain a positive public image among the residents of the

[41] Walmart, "Shareholders Meeting 2017," https://corporate.walmart.com/shareholders.

region on which it depends. Occasionally, these local philanthropic efforts translate into coverage outside of Arkansas, as in articles like Oliver Staley's in *Quartz,* which explicitly contrasts Walmart's conventional image in the media with its efforts in Northwest Arkansas.[42]

Walmart's interest in developing the region and its arts scenes is more than just neighborly interest: it is a complex phenomenon that many view with suspicion even as they benefit from it. Among the beneficiaries of Walmart's development efforts in Northwest Arkansas are the artists whose work their support brings into these spaces. Like the residents of Northwest Arkansas, these artists may also be suspicious of Walmart's projects, and may choose to express their suspicion through their work. Jason Isbell is one such artist. As the remainder of this chapter will show, his comments about Walmart create new resonances in the branded space of Northwest Arkansas.

"The Last of My Kind" and the Urban-Rural Divide

Jason Isbell is a contemporary Americana singer-songwriter renowned for his complex, poetic songwriting. He first came to national attention at the age of twenty-two when he joined the roster of the liberal southern rock band the Drive-By Truckers as the third guitarist on their tour for their breakout double-length concept album *Southern Rock Opera.* Isbell contributed two songs to the band's follow-up album *Decoration Day,* including both the title track and the fan-favorite "Outfit." He continued to write, record, and tour with the band, but frictions resulting from Isbell's drug use and his struggling marriage to the band's bassist, Shonna Tucker, ended with his departure from the Drive-By Truckers in 2007.[43] Since then, Isbell has been pursuing a solo career that began to flourish in 2013 with the release of *Southeastern,* which explored

[42] Staley.

[43] Patrick Doyle, "Jason Isbell's New Morning," *Rolling Stone* (2015), https://www.rollingstone.com/music/features/jason-isbells-new-morning-20150807.

autobiographical themes including Isbell's marriage to fiddle player Amanda Shires and his struggle to overcome drug addiction.[44] The album from which this chapter's track is drawn, *The Nashville Sound,* appeared in 2017 and includes several songs that respond directly or indirectly to the 2016 US Presidential election.

"The Last of My Kind" is the opening track on the album and represents a more indirect approach to the issues of the 2016 election. In portraying the rural-urban divide through both its lyrical and its musical content, the song exhibits many assumptions about the concept. For instance, the song emphasizes genre markers of country music, including fiddle, fingerpicked acoustic guitar, restrained percussion, and simple, singable, largely pentatonic melodies, as signifiers of rurality. This sonic approach is common in Isbell's solo work, but it is not the only one he uses. The next track on *The Nashville Sound,* for instance, exhibits a harder-edged Southern rock sound, while *Southeastern's* "Elephant" uses a less generically marked singer-songwriter style. Isbell's use of a strong country sound in this song therefore represents a conscious decision to highlight the presentation of rurality in the song's lyrics using a musical style identified with rural areas of the US.

The song formally reinscribes the rural-urban divide by locating the discussion of urban space in one formal section and the discussion of rural space in another. These sections are differentiated from each other by their harmonic structure, melody, and accompanying figures. The vocal line and lyrical gestures are also quite different between sections: the first formal section, which contains the discussion of the urban spaces, primarily consists of one-bar phrases and short lyrical ideas, characteristics marked in the orthography of the lyrics by the placement of periods at the end of nearly every line. The contrasting sections, on the other hand, are made

[44] James Sullivan, "Jason Isbell: 'There's Still Just as Much Awe' in Sobriety," *Rolling Stone*. (2013), https://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/jason-isbell-theres-still-just-as-much-awe-in-sobriety-20130801.

up of phrases that are twice as long; the lyrical ideas stretch into full sentences. This contrast is also apparent in the orthography, in which the lyrics of the two contrasting sections obviously extend beyond the right-hand margin of the other sections' lyrics. The refrain, which occurs at the end of both sections, oscillates between tonic and subdominant chords, a move that, at the end of the sections depicting rural space, returns the musical sound to harmonic patterns identified with the urban sections, metaphorically repeating the lyrics' depiction of the rural space vanishing away. The musicians' choice to use the contrasting section with its refrain as the harmonic basis of the lengthy playout further reinscribes this message; the fact that the song ends on a fade-out implies that the process continues unabated, cyclically repeating the symbolic erasure of rural life in perpetuity. All of these characteristics musically emphasize the song's representation of the essential difference between rural and urban spaces.

"The Last of My Kind"
Jason Isbell
The Nashville Sound (2017)

I couldn't be happy in the city at night.
Can't see the stars for the neon lights.
Sidewalk's dirty and the river is worse.
Underground trains all run in reverse.
Nobody here can dance like me,
everybody clapping on the one and three.

Am I the last of my kind?
Am I the last of my kind?

So many people with so much to do.
Winter so cold my hands turn blue.
Old men sleeping on the filthy ground
spend their whole day just walking around.
Nobody else here seems to care.
They walk right past them like they ain't even there.

Am I the last of my kind?
Am I the last of my kind?

Daddy said the river would always lead me home
but the river can't take me back in time, and Daddy's dead and gone.
The family's farm's a parking lot for Walton's Five and Dime.

Am I the last of my kind?
Am I the last of my kind?

Tried to go to college but I didn't belong.
Everything I said was either funny or wrong.
Laughed at my boots and laughed at my jeans.
Laughed when they gave me amphetamines
Left me alone in a bad part of town.
Thirty-six hours to come back down.

Am I the last of my kind?
Am I the last of my kind?

Mama says God won't give you too much to bear.
That might be true in Arkansas, but I'm a long long way from there.
That whole world's an old and faded picture in my mind.

Am I the last of my kind?
Am I the last of my kind?[45]

Lyrically, the song further reinforces the divide by focusing on a rural-to-urban migrant, portraying a common way to experience the rural-urban divide and therefore highlighting the differences between the kinds of space. The fact that the lyrics do not portray the process of this migration and instead depict only its starting and ending points both emphasizes the existence of the spaces as separate and confirms their status on opposite ends of an implicit divide. This choice also elides the existence of intermediate spaces between the two polar ends of the urban-rural divide—a figuration that the discussion of economic development in Northwest Arkansas above has already revealed to be unrepresentative of twenty-first century realities.

Finally, the song constructs the rural space from which the singer is displaced as lost, its constitutive spaces engulfed by a post-productivist landscape and its social makeup fading away with the speakers' parents' generation and its Christian mores. This element is the song's most

[45] Jason Isbell and the 400 Unit, liner notes to *The Nashville Sound.* Southeastern Records, 2017.

powerful expressive element partly because it reflects real anxieties about the direction of contemporary life. To theorize the nature of this anxiety, I turn to the work of geographer Tim Cresswell. Cresswell has developed a dialectic between two common tendencies that people have developed to conceptualize mobility: a sedentary metaphysics and a nomadic metaphysics.[46]

> The metaphysics of sedentarism is a way of thinking and acting that sees mobility as suspicious, as threatening, and as a problem. The mobility of others is captured, ordered, and emplaced in order to make it legible in a modern society. […] The metaphysics of nomadism, on the other hand, has little time for traditional kinds of 'placey place.' The world is seen through the lens of mobility, flow, becoming, and change. […] Place is seen as redundant, quaint, in the past—no more (or less) than the logical outcome of unique combinations of flow and velocity. […] When seen through the lens of a nomadic metaphysics, everything is in motion, and stability is illusory.[47]

These categories of thinking are relevant here for two reasons. First, as André Jansson has argued, it is not difficult to map these opposing "moral geographies" onto conventional attitudes regarding the city and the countryside, which he terms "pastoralist" and "modernizer."[48] In late modern America, these concepts have come to be mapped particularly clearly onto the urban, coastal centers of "nomadism" and the "sedentary" communities of rural-dwellers. These constructions are further sharpened by the identification of these metaphysics and their corresponding spaces with class, morals, and politics. These characteristics have come to mean that people on both sides of the divide view each other with intense suspicion.

But in the twenty-first century world, the moral geography of flow—the metaphysics of nomadism—has come to dominate the culture just as urban population centers have decimated rural spaces.[49] This fact has provoked significant and powerful feelings of anxiety and alienation

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[46] Tim Cresswell, *On the Move: Mobility in the Modern Western World* (London: Routledge, 2006), 26 ff.

[47] Ibid., 55.

[48] André Jansson, "The Hegemony of the Urban/Rural Divide: Cultural Transformations and Mediatized Moral Geographies of Sweden," *Space and Culture* 16, no. 1 (2013): 91.

[49] Ibid., 94.

in rural communities—feelings that have been widely cited as a contributing factor in the election of Donald Trump in 2016.[50] These feelings of alienation are precisely the ones that Isbell depicts in "The Last of My Kind," which is one reason that I read it as an oblique response to that political event. Isbell, I argue, attempts to portray the metaphysical underpinnings for the attitudes and decisions of imagined Trump voters in an effort to make sense of the election.

The cultural anxieties of the speaker of "The Last of My Kind" are thus based in real feelings of philosophical alienation, but the song crucially constructs them as exacerbated by the disappearing space that represents the kind of society, the variety of metaphysics, that the speaker prefers. One of the clearest references to this spatial shift, the shift from productivist to post-productivist space that practically paves over rural space to make way for urbanizing development, comes in the line "The family's farm's a parking lot for Walton's Five-and-Dime." This reference refers to a low-cost retail establishment named for its founder, Sam Walton, and founded in Bentonville, AR, the early 1950s.[51] Walton eventually turned this store into a worldwide superpower, changing its name along the way to Walmart. The original storefront in Bentonville Square now serves as the home of the Walmart Museum. This reference ties the identity of the lost rural space more firmly to Arkansas, which is mentioned by name in the second bridge, and specifically to Northwest Arkansas, the famously Walmart-dominated section of the state. The song therefore explicitly places itself outside of Arkansas, and outside of

[50] See e.g. Nate Cohn, "Why Trump Won: Working-Class Whites," The New York Times, November 09, 2016, accessed March 02, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/10/upshot/why-trump-won-working-class-whites.html?module=inline. Later analysis has complicated this view, suggesting that rural white Trump voters were motivated by racial factors; see e.g. Thomas B. Edsall, "Donald Trump's Identity Politics," The New York Times, August 24, 2017, accessed March 02, 2019. https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/24/opinion/donald-trump-identity-politics.html.

[51] Center for Land Use Interpretation, "Walton's Five and Dime (Also Home to the Walmart Museum), Arkansas," http://clui.org/ludb/site/waltons-five-and-dime-also-home-walmart-museum.

Northwest Arkansas in particular. But what happens to this reading of the song when it is re-placed in this region?

Walmart's Outlaws

In July of 2017, I attended the Outlaw Music Festival, a touring event featuring a variety of musical acts that broadly fall into the genre of Americana music. The application of the term "Outlaw" in the title of the music festival carries polyvalent connotations that lend the music a specific place within this broad category. "Outlaw" emphasizes the importance of figures like Willie Nelson, Johnny Cash, Waylon Jennings, and Kris Kristofferson, who used the word to signify their resistance to country music's established genre conventions, in the genre history of the acts involved with the festival.[52] This connection is further reinforced by—or is perhaps co-constitutive with—the fact that Willie Nelson was the headliner at all of the festival's events. The term also recalls the anti-commercial bent of that insurgent group, a tendency that is always expressed simultaneously with an assertion of the increased creative license available to those who resist the "assembly line system and pop hegemony."[53]

Americana as a broader genre rehearses the same discourses evident in the festival's name. It represents the intersection of a variety of musical genres and styles including alternative country, blues, southern rock, folk, and occasionally jazz. Americana evinces a strong tendency towards anti-commercialist rhetoric. This often emerges expressly in the discussion of its relatively low monetary income (the road to Americana is "seldom strewn with megabucks") and implicitly in its self-definition against the myth of mass cultural popular music styles as

[52] Fabian Holt, *Genre in Popular Music*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 2007, 75.

[53] Ibid., 75.

uncreative ("Most Americana artists have traded the dream of major money for the freedom of expression and exercise of creativity that the field offers").[54]

The irony of this posture is evident from the fact that Americana, too, is a commercial genre. Diane Pecknold has shown that Americana as a genre derived from the institutionalization and commercialization of the established networks and practices of alt.country.[55] Pecknold argues that the generic overlap and intersections that are so characteristic of Americana derive from the process of its institutionalization; the release of the compilation album *For a Life of Sin* in 1994, for instance, associated a variety of bands with little in common besides "their status as label mates."[56] Questions about what constituted Americana music were answered by a radio chart.[57] Even the anti-commercial posture of Americana music functions, Pecknold argues, as a commercialized mode of appeal to the middle market. "Far from challenging the very foundation of mainstream country's commercialism, alternative country's [i.e. Americana's] politics of anti-commercialism and its independent institutional base positioned it perfectly for a symbiotic relationship with the Nashville establishment."[58]

The Outlaw Music Festival participates in these discourses not only through its name, but also through the acts it incorporates into its lineups. Though Willie Nelson performs at every stop on the tour, the other slots of the festival are filled by a variety of other Americana acts. The

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[54] Monte Dutton, *True to the Roots: Americana Music Revealed* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press), 2006, xi; Michael Scott Cain, *The Americana Revolution: From Country and Blues Roots to the Avett Brothers, Mumford & Sons, and Beyond* (Lanham: Roman & Littlefield), 2017, xxii; see also xxiv-xxvi.

[55] Diane Pecknold, "Selling Out or Buying In?: Alt.Country's Cultural Politics of Commercialism," in *Old Roots, New Routes: The Cultural Politics of Alt.Country Music*, edited by Pamela Fox and Barbara Ching (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press), 2008, 29.

[56] Ibid., 32.

[57] Ibid., 33.

[58] Ibid., 34. See Pecknold's third endnote for the slippage in terms between "Americana" and "alt.country" in her chapter.

festival stop in Rogers, AR featured Lukas Nelson, Willie Nelson's son; Margo Price, a feminist country singer with a complex relationship to Nashville; Sheryl Crow, who rebranded herself as a country artist in 2013; and Jason Isbell.[59] Both Isbell, who was touring with tracks from the album *The Nashville Sound*, and Price, who performed a song critical of Nashville entitled "This Town Gets Around" in Rogers, used their music to play into Americana's anti-Nashville and thus anti-commercialist posture—its "Outlaw" identity.

The location of this stop of the Outlaw Music Festival at the Walmart AMP in a concert sponsored in part by the Walton Foundation made these implicit tensions between the anti-commercial posture of Americana and its function as commercial music extremely obvious. Sheryl Crow's performance at the concert also represented a conflict: she feuded with Walmart over their refusal to stock her 1996 self-titled album due to its inclusion of lyrics critical of the retailer, a situation that commentators like Mark A. Fox have compared to censorship.[60] Her participation in a concert branded with the name of the institution therefore creates the impression of a contradiction. The presence of commercial philanthropy framed the entire festival, undercutting the foundational myths of the genre and artists featured in the event even as it enabled them to enter a space that so lovingly welcomed it. Americana invites its listeners to believe that "[a]way from the music industry's interstate highways—bordered by their very own shopping malls, convenience stores, and fast-food franchises—there's so much to experience."[61]

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[59] Marissa R. Moss, "Margo Price on Nashville Hypocrisy, Gun Control and Trump," Rolling Stone, June 25, 2018, accessed April 10, 2019, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-country/margo-price-on-feminism-gun-control-nashville-hypocrisy-and-trump-196854/; Zack O'Malley Greenburg, "Inside Sheryl Crow's Rebirth As A Country Singer," Forbes, September 10, 2013, accessed April 10, 2019, https://www.forbes.com/sites/zackomalleygreenburg/2013/09/10/inside-sheryl-crows-rebirth-as-a-country-singer/#5386e65a14da.

[60] Fox, 508.

[61] Dutton, *True to the Roots,* xi.

Northwest Arkansas makes the suspension of disbelief that this statement requires impossible to achieve.

Hearing "The Last of My Kind" in Northwest Arkansas

The contradictions between Americana's anti-commercialist posture and its status as commoditized product not only affect listeners' perception of the genre, but also impact their aesthetic interpretation of the music positioned within it. Hearing "The Last of My Kind" in Northwest Arkansas provides a powerful example of aesthetic consequences like these. As I have argued above, "The Last of My Kind" represents the alienation of the speaker in large part by reinforcing the rural-urban divide as a way to justify and deepen the speaker's feelings. The use of country music sonic signifiers allows the sounds of the vanished space to suggest nostalgia for what was lost. The song's formal and lyrical structure sharpen the urban-rural divide for the sake of emotional realism but at the expense of presenting an accurate picture of contemporary life. The speaker's anxieties speak to real fears about the spread of urbanization and its concomitant philosophical perspectives while reinforcing the spatial realities that compound those feelings. All of these elements combine to suggest that the speaker's rural home—a space that is explicitly identified with Arkansas—no longer exists in a way that reflects the speaker's sentimental image of the place.

I argue that a similar sense of alienation results from hearing "The Last of My Kind" both in the local context of the self-contradictory Outlaw Music Festival and in the broader context of Northwest Arkansas' semi-urban geography. As I will show, the factors I identified above as essential to the song's construction of the rural-urban divide are either contradicted or complicated by interpreting the song within this spatial and performative context.

While the flexibility of studio recording allowed Isbell, the 400 Unit, and their producers to generate a strongly country-tinged sound, performances of this song in live shows tend to render it such that it blends more clearly into the band's more typical sound, which, with its electric instruments, extended slide-guitar solos, and hard-edged timbres, might be better described as southern rock. Even Amanda Shires' fiddle playing leans towards rock sound when she plays live with the 400 Unit. She makes frequent use of aggressive bow strokes, electronic amplification, and extended techniques that simulate the distortions of electronic instruments. She employs such techniques in this song, as well, which in live shows of this tour typically ends with a playout taking the form of a duet between Sadler Vaden's electric guitar and Shires' rock fiddle, complete with a virtuosic live fade-out. These characteristics are clearly audible in the recording of this song on Isbell's 2018 *Live from the Ryman* album. Isbell's acoustic guitar accompanies the verses in an unobtrusive fingerpicked style that partially replicates the album sound, but the instrumental sections obviously depart from the album's studio production of non-electrified, rural-identified sounds. The sonic signifiers that were so important to the song's portrayal of the rural-urban divide, then, are complicated significantly in the live show by a sonic emphasis on a harder-edged sound.

The song's portrayal of the urban-rural divide is also complicated by the geography of Northwest Arkansas. For one thing, Northwest Arkansas' mixture of rural and urban signifiers throws the artificiality of the song's formal division between urban and rural spaces into sharp relief, just as Walmart's sponsorship of the Outlaw Music Festival undercuts the pretensions of the whole event. The trope of disappearing rural space, symbolized in the song with the line "the family farm is a parking lot for Walton's five-and-dime," is also complicated by the presence of working farms just a few miles away from the venue where this concert took place. But the fact

that such spaces are surrounded by the evidence of urbanizing development highlights the transience of rural spaces in this rapidly-changing landscape. The fact that Walmart appears in the song as a symbol of the urban sprawl that is destroying the rural space even as it sponsors this event is, of course, a profound irony. Isbell's onstage comments about Walmart, which related a story in which he was fired from a job at Walmart for playing Jimi Hendrix on the stereo in his truck in the store parking lot, allowed him to present himself as a figure who refuses to play by Walmart's rules. The fact that Isbell did this during a set at the Walmart AMP is a concise, ironic expression of the tensions between Outlaw Country's pretensions to resistance and anti-commercialism and their willingness to be paid by the very enterprises they critique.

This more complicated vision of the rural-urban relation is more reflective of contemporary scholarly thought on the construct and its applicability to twenty-first century life. A majority of contemporary geographers find the concept of a rural-urban divide or dichotomy to be inaccurate and often grossly misleading.[62] Re-placing this song within the context of an embodied performance enables a reading of the song that takes such perspectives into account.

Finally, I will address the song's most salient expressive element, namely its emphasis on alienation, as expressed for example in its refrain, "Am I the last of my kind?" This sentiment is also complicated by performing this song in a live context. For one thing, the commercialized nature of the event means that the alienation and isolation of the text becomes commodified for the purposes of distribution to a crowd. Of course, this tension is inherent in the album version of

[62] See e.g. Kjell Andersson et al., eds., *Beyond the Rural Urban Divide: Cross-continental Perspectives on the Differentiated Countryside and Its Regulation* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing Limited, 2009); Paul Cloke, "Conceptualizing Rurality," in *Handbook of Rural Studies*, ed. Paul Cloke, Terry Marsden, and Patrick Mooney (London: SAGE Publications, 2006); Kate Murphy, *Fears and Fantasies: Modernity, Gender, and the Rural-Urban Divide* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010); Michael Woods, *Rural*, ed. Sarah Holloway and Gill Valentine, Key Ideas in Geography (London: Routledge, 2011); and, for a musicological perspective that makes a similar claim, Stefan Fiol, "From Folk to Popular and Back: Musical Feedback between Studio Recordings and Festival Dance-Songs in Uttarakhand, North India," *Asian Music* 42, no. 1 (2011).

the song as well; it is part and parcel with the very existence of a music industry. But the conventions of popular music performance themselves also undercut the meaning of this song as the crowd *joins in* on the singing of this refrain.[63] This performative gesture, which is common in American popular music concerts, combines with the semantic content of the lyric to illustrate the mass appeal of the sentiments of isolation and alienation. The performance of this song therefore results in providing an answer to the rhetorical question of the song's title—and that answer is a negative intoned in a crowd in unison.

Conclusion

All of this discussion may seem to overlook the clearest dissonance between the song and the space, namely that the speaker of the song claims to be a "long, long way" from Arkansas even as, during this concert, the singer was, in fact, in Arkansas. But what I hope to have shown by analyzing the tensions between this text and its contexts is that one can experience the alienation the song posits as a result of rural-to-urban migration without ever needing to leave Arkansas. Hearing Jason Isbell's "The Last of My Kind" in Northwest Arkansas enables another kind of alienation: that which produces the distance necessary to view a familiar space in a new light. Even while standing in Arkansas, then, one could say with truth that she is "a long, long way from [here.]"

[63] This performative element is clearly audible on the *Live from the Ryman* version of the song.

CHAPTER TWO

Beethoven in Walmartland: A Pastoral Travesty

As I watch my fellow concertgoers flow into the concert hall of the Walton Arts Center through the Walmart Lobby, I ascend the JB Hunt Transportation Staircase to my seat in the balcony. I leaf through a program full of advertisements for events like the Procter and Gamble Broadway Series and the Mattel Children's Theater series until the lights go down. The CEO of the Walton Foundation, the nonprofit that runs the concert hall, emerges to deliver a jocular curtain speech that praises the event's corporate sponsors, including Walmart and Tyson Chicken. Once the last applause for these corporate benefactors has faded, a conductor and a piano soloist emerge to deliver a graceful and witty account of Beethoven's "Emperor" piano concerto. The soloist's delicate pianissimos accompany the crinkling of candy wrappers and the Pavlovian hiss of soda bottles as the audience begins to indulge in concessions purchased in the lobby before the event. The first movement ends, and the audience applauds even as the *éminences grises* in the front rows—also sponsors of the event—shake their heads in disapprobation.

The concert described above, though reminiscent of the capitalist excesses one might expect to encounter in a novel by David Foster Wallace, took place in Fayetteville, Arkansas as a part of the Artosphere Festival. Artosphere, an annual summer art and music festival with explicit environmentalist goals, is based in northwest Arkansas and sponsored by many of the global corporate interests that are headquartered in the region. Prominent among these is the Walton Foundation, a Walmart-affiliated nonprofit whose deep investment in the region I began to explore in this thesis' first chapter. Artosphere is perhaps their most prominent investment in

the region's high cultural music scenes: the festival features live performances of classical music and a film series, and schedules several of its concerts in the great hall of Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, a decision that compounds the audience's exposure to Walmart-branded high art.

Even as the nonprofit emphasizes and capitalizes on the cultural cachet of these types of creative activity, a significant part of the impact of the Walton Foundation's involvement has been to diminish the barriers to entry that often characterize or even define high culture. At the same time, corporate support for classical music provides real opportunities for classical musicians during a time when public support and regard for the style is thought to be rapidly fading.[64] Furthermore, the association between these corporations and the festival's explicit environmentalism raise important ethical questions for all of the festival's participants—including its audience. In this way, the Artosphere festival reveals the extent to which corporations, in supporting classical music cultures and environmentalist causes, can reinforce their own interest through the generation of symbolic capital—a symbiotic process that is not without ethical and aesthetic pitfalls for the performers, who become complicit partners in the self-justifying narratives of global capitalism.

This chapter opens with a brief summary of some critiques of neoliberal environmentalist efforts with which I identify Walmart's sponsorship of the festival. I will then discuss the Artosphere Festival's 2018 season, arguing that it represents a purely symbolic environmentalism that barely conceals its capitalistic tendencies. Next, I provide a brief résumé of the role of Beethoven in contemporary American classical music cultures and a discussion of the relationships between his "Pastoral" Symphony, no. 6, and constructions of nature. Finally, I

[64] For just one prominent example of a response to this perception, see Lawrence Kramer, *Why Classical Music Still Matters* (Berkeley: University of California Press), 2007.

turn to the all-Beethoven program discussed above, which featured a performance of the "Pastoral" Symphony accompanied by live-drawn cartoons and animation by the French visual artist Grégoire Pont. Using reactions shared by audience members after the concert, I argue that this particular performance of the symphony reveals the many contradictions inherent in the complex of classical music, environmentalism, and corporate America.

Greenwashing Walmart

Although Artosphere's connection of Walmart and environmentalism may appear to be counter-intuitive, it is in fact reflective of both a larger strategy of self-presentation on the part of the company and an increasingly common trend in neoliberal capitalism more generally. This latter trend, labeled "neoliberal conservation" by a group of authors seeking to critique the phenomenon, encompasses the business practices, discursive habits, and governmental attitudes that perpetuate capitalist structures even as they undertake the apparently unrelated work of environmental conservation.[65] The concealment of the essential capitalist ends of such conservation efforts is one reason that corporate environmentalism can sound like such an oxymoron.[66] Büscher et al. point out the myriad ways in which neoliberal conservation efforts do, in fact, propagate capitalist structures even as they conceal the contradictions inherent in that proposition. As they write, "neoliberal conservation's core axiom is that in order for natures to be 'saved,' acts of 'nature saving' must be imbued with profit potential or else there is little incentive for rational actors to pursue it."[67] This philosophy maintains that the means of protecting the natural world reside "in the commoditization of nature to engender both economic

[65] Bram Büscher, Sian Sullivan, Katja Neves, Jim Igoe, and Dan Brockington, "Towards a Synthesized Critique of Neoliberal Biodiversity Conservation," *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 23, no. 2 (June 2012): 4-30.

[66] Ibid., 6.

[67] Ibid., 13.

growth and ecological sustainability. In so doing, it privileges as a solution the very structures and processes of neoliberal capitalism that produce the socio-ecological damages it seeks to redress."[68] This succinct expression of the contradictions inherent in neoliberal conservation reveals those elements of the philosophy that its adherents must conceal in order for the worldview to perpetuate itself.

Among the most powerful means of effecting this concealment are the production of artistic and advertising representations that reinforce the messages these neoliberal actors want to carry over while concealing those they wish to hide.[69] Büscher et al. illustrate this approach, which they term "greenwashing," with several real-world examples drawn from media forms as diverse as advertising, ecotourism, philanthropic campaigns, and advertisements. "Dawn dish soap commercials," for instance, "depict the product's role in saving animals from oil spills, [but conceal] the fact that Dawn could neither be produced nor delivered to the supermarket without the very same substance that it saves those animals from."[70] The fact that these kinds of truths are so easily overlooked is one of the factors that is essential to neoliberalism's persuasiveness.[71] "Thus spectacle in the context of neoliberal conservation intertwines propaganda, marketing, and governmentality to open up new conservation spaces for capitalist expansion while providing the marketed appearance that this trajectory bears no contradiction with ecological integrity or social equity."[72]

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[68] Ibid., 14.

[69] Ibid., 16 ff.

[70] Ibid., 17.

[71] Ibid., 13.

[72] Ibid., 18.

All of these tendencies are visible in Walmart's environmentalist efforts, including its sponsorship of the Artosphere Festival. Under the influence of Jib Ellison, Walmart became one of the first corporations to embrace environmentalist practices as a business strategy. Ellison's philosophy held that the "most sustainable business, the cleanest, most energy-efficient, least wasteful company, will have the competitive advantage."[73] In addition, Walmart's efforts in conservation improve their public image by creating a narrative in which they are a powerful actor that helps protect the world—an increasingly important posture to adopt in today's culture of woke capitalism.[74] The Artosphere Festival thus functions both as a misdirection, a spectacle of neoliberal conservatism, and as an advertisement for Walmart's ecological goodwill. It is a method for the propagation of capitalist systems. But how do these social realities affect the actual enactment of the festival, the behavior of the agents involved in it, and the aesthetic impact of the events that comprise it?

Artosphere: High Art and Environmentalism on Walmart's Dime

The Artosphere Festival, founded in 2010 and sponsored by the Walton Foundation, styles itself as "Arkansas' Art and Nature Festival."[75] It features a wide variety of events that relate to its missions as an arts festival and as an environmentalist undertaking. Every year, the festival puts on a series of film screenings, often featuring art house or documentary films that relate to the theme of the festival, which changes every year. At the 2018 festival, for example, the theme of "Water" was represented by films including Tomm Moore's animated feature *Song*

[73] Edward Humes, *Force of Nature: The Unlikely Story of Wal-Mart's Green Revolution* (New York: HarperBusiness), 2011, p. 3.

[74] Ross Douthat, "The Rise of Woke Capital," The New York Times, February 28, 2018, accessed February 23, 2019, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/28/opinion/corporate-america-activism.html.

[75] City of Fayetteville, "Artosphere Returns June 10-23," Experience Fayetteville, accessed February 5, 2019, https://web.archive.org/web/20190205181657/http://www.experiencefayetteville.com/artosphere.

of the Sea and Jeff Orlowski's documentary *Chasing Coral.* These programming choices contribute to the festival organizers' public presentation of an environmentalist veneer.

The festival's musical events are much more numerous than all the others put together, such that concerts and other musical activities come to represent the core of the festival's programming each summer. These concerts include several instrumental chamber music programs, often featuring guest artists such as violist Roberto Diaz and ensemble-in-residence the Dover Quartet, as well as two concerts that feature the full, symphonic complement of the Artosphere Festival Orchestra and one that highlights a smaller group as a chamber orchestra.

Repertoire tends to focus on a mixture of common-practice orchestral music—the chamber orchestra concert is a "Mostly Mozart" program, and concerts in recent years have prominently featured Brahms, Mendelssohn, and Dvořák—and twentieth- and twenty-first century compositions, typically including at least a few pieces by living composers. The 2018 festival included the Beethoven concert that is the primary subject of this paper, but also featured on the Mostly Mozart program a piece by the Radiohead guitarist and film composer Jonny Greenwood, and the final concert of the season featured Jennifer Higdon's viola concerto. That concerto filled the spot between Leonard Bernstein's two most famous orchestral compositions: the Overture to *Candide* and the Orchestral Dances from *West Side Story*. The festival's orchestral programming thus features a reasonably eclectic mix of classical musical genres and styles, using conventional and canonical fare to appeal to established classical music devotees while also incorporating new and innovatively-performed repertoires to entice newer (and younger) audiences.

In addition to these conventional concert types, the festival also features two styles of musical performance that move beyond the concert hall setting. "Off the Grid" concerts send

small-to-medium sized groups of musicians from the Artosphere Festival Orchestra out into coffeehouses, restaurants, and bars to give informal performances. I attended one evening's worth of these events, which took place in restaurants on or near Fayetteville's Dickson Street, essentially the main drag of the college town. All three of the groups I saw perform were playing in upscale, hipster-friendly venues. Two were in mixed coffeehouse-bar establishments—stimulants in the morning, depressants in the evening—that prominently featured wood floors and exposed brickwork. One occurred on the porch of Arsega's at the Depot (Figure 2.1)—a repurposed, gentrified train station that acts as a locus point for the Razorback Greenway, one of the many bike trails that Walton Foundation money has developed to connect disparate parts of the region.[76]

Figure 2.1 The Artosphere group performing at Arsega's, as seen from the Razorback Greenway.

[76] Jeremy Pate, "Blazing a New Trail for Bike Commuters in Northwest Arkansas," Walton Family Foundation, April 25, 2018, accessed February 05, 2019, https://web.archive.org/web/20190205184942/https://www.waltonfamilyfoundation.org/stories/home-region/blazing-a-new-trail-for-bike-commuters-in-northwest-arkansas.

The players at each venue represented an idiosyncratic mix of instruments and performed an eclectic selection of repertoire. The group at Arsega's was playing the conclusion of Mozart's Oboe Quartet in F Major, K370/368b as I approached, but with quite a few extra instruments, including an English Horn that protested the humid weather with sour notes. The group at the other coffee house, which consisted primarily of strings and percussion, played an arrangement of Led Zeppelin's "Immigrant Song," from the British rock band's 1970 album *Led Zeppelin III*. The third group I saw was the smallest, as it featured only a string trio and a flutist. They were inside a Japanese restaurant called Wasabi's, where they were positioned in the corner of the L-shaped main room. A large courtyard stood just across from the corner where they sat, in between the branches of the L and separated from the interior of the building by large windows. Just outside those windows was another live musician—a DJ who played easy-listening tracks to the patrons seated outdoors and to passersby whom the restaurant's managers likely hoped his music would entice. The contrast with the classically-trained musicians, who were both invisible and inaudible from the street, was palpable (Figure 2.2).

Figure 2.2 The Artosphere group and the DJ at Wasabi's, as seen from my table inside the restaurant. The DJ was photographed through a window.

If the presence of Artosphere musicians at Wasabi's had not been advertised on the festival's website, I would never have known they were there. As an outreach event, then, the "off the grid" concerts were variably successful; however, all of them were tallied up as part of the "twenty-nine outreach performances" touted at the final concert of the festival. These performances therefore serve a discursive function for Artosphere: they allow the organizers to quantify the festival's openness and accessibility even as the event maintains its classical identity; the number of people actually reached by these outreach performances appears to be of only secondary concern.

"Trail Mix" events, the other non-traditional performance context that the festival presents, foreground the region's curated outdoor spaces by placing small groups of musicians along the path of hiking trails in the area. One of these events occurred on the grounds of Crystal Bridges. Musicians and arts-and-crafts stations were scattered through the hiking trails that the museum curates on its extensive land holdings. Signs that pointed visitors to the various ensembles and activities listed sponsors of the event, including Procter and Gamble, while the entire Crystal Bridges complex, as I argued in the previous chapter, is branded with the Walton name (Figure 2.3). These performances allow the festival to demonstrate a symbolic synergy between its musical and its environmentalist goals by literally placing the music in outdoor spaces. This is an asset to the festival's branding: Artosphere prominently foregrounds its status as an environmentalist event in all of its promotional materials. The "About" section of the festival's website positions it as "a creative framework for the community to discuss issues of sustainability and environmental awareness," and touts unspecified accomplishments such as

Figure 2.3 Left: two Artosphere violinists playing a duet near a stream on the grounds of Crystal Bridges. Right: corporate sponsors listed on a large Trail Mix sign. Photo credits: Edward Pratt, Jr.

encouraging the Walton Arts Center's Sustainability Committee to "implement initiatives to save resources year-round."[77] The emphasis on environmentalism also seems to have an impact on programming decisions, such as the decision to show the abovementioned documentary *Chasing Coral*. The choice to perform Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony, with its second movement entitled "Scene by a Brook" and its famous storm sequence, is also an example of this kind of programming. The festival organizers use symbolic programming and weak language ("discuss issues") to put forth a public image of environmentalist action while doing very little to effect actual environmental change.

My experience as an attendee of the festival thus involved significantly less emphasis on environmentalism than the promotional materials suggested. The focus on the natural world seemed less a call for sustainable practices than a postmodern twist on the romanticization of nature. My knowledge of the area and of the festival, of how much fuel it must have taken not

[77] "About the [Artosphere] Festival," Walton Arts Center, accessed February 3, 2019, https://waltonartscenter.org/artosphere/about-the-festival/.

only to transport the entire Artosphere Festival Orchestra and their instruments to Northwest Arkansas from their far-flung points of origin, but also to transport those musicians back and forth between their various performance venues in Bentonville, Fayetteville, and smaller towns around the area that featured Trail Mix or Off the Grid performances, surely influenced my skeptical reception of the festival's environmentalist branding. Or perhaps the fact that I needed to drive twenty minutes to see concerts in Fayetteville and ten to see concerts in Bentonville merely kept the price of gas at the forefront of my mind.

A festival that truly lived by its sustainability goals would place more of an emphasis on local talent and on performing within a geographical area navigable without the use of fossil fuels. But then, changes like these would likely decrease the prestige of the performances. Focusing on local talent would mean that the orchestra could not claim to be nationally, and even internationally, competitive despite its location; centering the performances in Fayetteville would prevent the use of the lovely, conspicuously branded and self-consciously natural space of the Crystal Bridges museum and its grounds.

That the Artosphere festival focuses primarily on symbolic forms of environmental activism at the expense of sustainable music-making is therefore symbolic of the tensions between the festival's goals. Playing to patrons' and sponsors' expectations of a world-class classical music festival inevitably diminishes the possibility of putting on a truly sustainable show. Without a radical reinvention of the terms, classical music and sustainability are as incompatible as environmentalism and capitalism. But the assertion of environmentalist goals and the halfhearted execution of some few symbolic conservationist acts allows the festival organizers, sponsors, and attendees to imagine that action has been taken and that change has

been made. Artosphere is an environmentalist spectacle in Büscher et al.'s sense of the term: the persuasiveness of its messaging is more important than the efficacy of its impact.

Beethoven and the "Pastoral"

One of the ways that the Artosphere Festival fashions an image of effective aesthetic performance is through its use of Ludwig van Beethoven. The prominent role that Beethoven occupied in the 2018 Artosphere Festival at once reflects and resists this composer's particular significance in classical music. Beethoven embodies a complex set of conflicting trends and values in contemporary thinking about classical music; he is a figure whose extensive contradictions within these discourses are matched or exceeded only by Richard Wagner. On the one hand, he is recognized as one of the most compelling composers ever to work within the Western classical tradition, capable of inspiring awe even in untrained listeners. Michael Broyles' book *Beethoven in America* opens with vignettes describing the literal and figurative journeys two such listeners took towards Beethoven; one of these figures, Ira F. Brilliant, used the fortune he gained as a real estate developer to gather the largest private collection of Beethoven materials in the world. He eventually donated these materials to San José State University as an essential component of that university's Beethoven Center, which still bears Brilliant's name.[78] The nexus of American Beethoven scholarship and performance is thus already associated with capitalist success and philanthropic giving.

The affection that Brilliant and other upper-class businesspeople have for Beethoven plays into the other contemporary trend in opinions about the composer: his role as a symbol of, and even a metonym for, the canon and all of its racist, patriarchal, and universalizing

[78] Michael Broyles, *Beethoven in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 2011, pp. 2-3; see also "Ira F. Brilliant," Beethoven Center, accessed February 22, 2019, https://web.archive.org/web/20190222210603/http://www.sjsu.edu/beethoven/about/ira_f_brilliant/.

connotations.[79] In *Feminine Endings,* Susan McClary famously critiques Beethoven as the masculine composer *par excellence*; Lydia Goehr's landmark *Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* names Beethoven in the first paragraph of the preface and the first page of the introduction as a foremost symbol of the effects of canonization; and Mina Yang's semi-recuperative study of twenty-first century classical music is entitled *Planet Beethoven.*[80] Beethoven as concept functions as a symbol for everything productive and everything problematic in classical music as it is understood in the modern day.

Though Artosphere's Beethoven concert reflects both trends of this discourse, its relation to the critical element in Beethoven reception is implicit rather than explicit. Devoting an entire program to a single composer is, of course, an automatic symbol of that composer's preeminence. Beethoven is the only composer to be honored in this way at the festival; though the two other orchestral concerts offered a majority of their real estate respectively to Mozart and Bernstein, those concerts also each featured a piece by a living composer. Beethoven is thus positioned within the festival as the *primus inter pares,* the only figure so dominant as to demand a stage unto himself.

At the same time, there is an undeniable sense of compensation at work within this concert and the rest of the festival. The program opened with a performance of the fifth piano concerto with soloist Maurizio Baglini, and the primary work on the program, the "Pastoral" symphony, was dominated by the addition of Grégoire Pont's cartoon interpretation. The presence of two virtuoso performers, and of cartoons in particular, diminishes the impression of

[79] Broyles, *Beethoven in America*, 8.

[80] Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 1991, 123 ff., summarized in Broyles, *Beethoven in America,* p. 141 ff.; Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 2007, p. ix, xvii; Mina Yang, *Planet Beethoven: Classical Music at the Turn of the Millennium* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press), 2014.

Beethoven as a dominant creative force in the program while also working to dismantle associations between the composer's canonic status and perceptions of elitism or exclusivity, as I discuss below. But the structure of the festival, with its dozens of outreach performances and conscientious incorporation of music by living composers, also functions as a way to excuse the presence of this one all-Beethoven concert. The tacit awareness of Beethoven's potentially controversial nature seems to structure the experience of the entire festival.

But the structure of the festival also impacts the particular shape of the program. The choice of Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony, no. 6, places this Beethoven program squarely within the purview of Artosphere's stated focus on water and environmentalism. The "Pastoral," by virtue of its identity as proto-program music, is perhaps the most famous example of Beethoven's ur-Romantic devotion to nature. The first movement, according to its subtitle, depicts the "Awakening of cheerful feelings upon arrival in the countryside" (*Erwachen heiterer Empfindungen bei der Ankunft auf dem Lande*) while other movements depict animal life, particularly birdsong; the lives of "country folk" (*Landleute*); and, famously, a thunderstorm. These characteristics all make it a logical choice for an environmentalist festival centering on nature; the presence of movements depicting a storm and a brook also strengthens the piece's connection to the seasonal theme of water.

These are the outlines of the most basic and widespread interpretation of the "Pastoral." Roland Schmenner offers a more complicated perspective in the published version of his dissertation on the symphony.[81] Schmenner argues that the portrayal of nature in the symphony is, like all things "natural," a fiction contingent upon social, literary, religious, and

[81] *Die Pastorale: Beethoven, das Gewitter, und der Blitzableiter* (Kassel: Bärenreiter), 1998.

technological—and, I would like to add, economical—constructions.[82] In Schmenner's words, "Nature is never 'pure' or 'free,' but rather constitutes itself only through its interrelationship with the human."[83] Beethoven's representation of nature in the "Pastoral," he goes on to argue, is fundamentally shaped by contemporary discourses around the sublime, by developing practices of tourism, and by the recent introduction of the lightning rod to Europe. This last element, which is fundamental to Schmenner's reading of the symphony's storm movement, is particularly provocative.

> Schiller claims: 'Therefore must the sublime indeed be dreadful [*furchtbar*], but it must not arouse true dread [*wirkliche Furcht*].' But if sublime nature is to be truly experienced, then certain safety precautions must be met that make this at all possible. [Christian] Begemann includes among these safety components the following: spatial distance; knowledge about security through theoretical, scientific reflection; and practical security through technological discoveries like the lightning rod.[84]

Schmenner's introduction of the concept of distance and safety measures as a condition of possibility for Beethoven's depiction the storm movement has fascinating implications for the movement's interpretation. It introduces an additional layer of mediation to the symphony's presentation of the storm: already removed from a real thunderstorm by its very status as music, the movement is now presented as a representation not of a storm itself, but of the safe observation of one.

Schmenner's emphasis on the societal construction of nature can also have productive impacts on the way we read the presence of a performance of the symphony in the twenty-first

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[82] Schmenner, *Die Pastorale,* 1-2.

[83] Ibid., 2. ["Natur ist nie 'rein' oder 'frei', sondern konstituiert sich erst durch die Wechselbeziehung mit dem Menschen."]

[84] Ibid., 10. ["Schiller fordert: 'Das erhabene Objekt muß also zwar furchtbar seyn, aber wirkliche Furcht darf es nicht erregen'. Soll aber die erhabene Natur real erfahren werden, so sind bestimmte Sicherheitsvorkehrungen zu treffen, die dies erst ermöglichen. Begemann zählt zu diesen Sicherheitskomponenten: die räumliche Distanz, das Wissen um Sicherheit durch theoretische, wissenschaftliche Reflexion und die praktische Sicherheit durch technologische Erfindungen wie den Blitzableiter."]

century. Although we now have even more technological controls over dangerous natural phenomena, we also live in a period of ecological crisis that is inextricably bound up with the development of those very same technologies. Disastrous weather events have become more common even as we develop better ways to deal with them. The branding of Artosphere as environmentalist embeds many of these discourses within the festival, making connections and comparisons between Beethoven's storms and our own an inevitability. Incorporating our own constructions of the environment in our interpretation of Beethoven's is both a normal and a desirable aesthetic move; as we will see, Pont's cartoons enact this very gesture. In his overwriting of Beethoven's program, Pont renders these already complex interrelations between humanity, nature, technology, and art even more complicated.

Grégoire Pont's "Pastoral"

One of the most striking elements of the Artosphere version of Beethoven's Sixth is its incorporation of cartoons. Cartoons and classical music appreciation have had a long relationship, particularly in American culture, where studios like Disney (*Fantasia*), Hanna-Barbera (*Tom and Jerry*), and Warner Brothers (*Merrie Melodies*) have solidified the connection through long familiarity.[85] More recently, orchestras have begun drawing on this tradition by offering programs of cartoon music, often with the relevant cartoons projected above the orchestra.[86] This kind of program often participates in a given orchestra's outreach or audience

[85] Daniel Goldmark, "Classical Music and Hollywood Cartoons: A Primer on the Cartoon Canon," in *The Cartoon Music Book*, ed. Daniel Goldmark and Yuval Taylor (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2002), pp. 103-114.

[86] See e.g. "Bugs Bunny at the Symphony II," New York Philharmonic, Accessed February 15, 2019, https://web.archive.org/web/20190215194605/https://nyphil.org/concerts-tickets/1819/bugs-bunny-at-the-symphony-ii-live.

development initiatives. Such concerts complicate the common parodic representation of concert halls in these cartoons by presenting them in the very venue they mock.[87]

The cartoons for Artosphere's "Pastoral" participate in this genre of concert but utilize an idiosyncratic technique to do so. Grégoire Pont, the French cartoonist who presented at Artosphere, has developed a system for the live accompaniment of classical music by cartoons. The system, called Cinesthetic, combines pre-drawn images and pre-rendered animations with live-drawn digital elements to create a variety of effects. The cartoons are projected onto a screen behind the orchestra in the same manner as in Bugs Bunny concerts. In the version of Cinesthetic I saw at Artosphere, the cursor of Pont's digital pen remained visible, helping the audience differentiate which aspects of the drawings are rendered in real time.

The most striking and effective of the techniques Pont employs in Cinesthetic is the careful matching of live-drawn elements with pre-rendered animations. Several guiding marks—the beak and feet of a bird, for instance—act as anchor points around which Pont adds new markings, typically in time to the music. As a particularly strong or notable musical gesture occurs, the drawing is replaced with another that I surmise was developed before the concert. This new image is the first frame of a pre-rendered animation. This process of carefully matching a new drawing with an older animation creates the illusion that the image Pont has just drawn comes to life on the screen. The drawing appears to be instantly animated, brought miraculously to life.[88] This method and the frequency of its usage throughout a Cinesthetic program reveal that

[87] Daniel Goldmark explores such parodic visions of concert halls in *Tunes for 'Toons: Music and the Hollywood Cartoon* (University of California Press, 2005), pp. 107-132.

[88] Pont's website, https://www.gregoirepont.com/, contains several videos that provide examples of this technique. The example from his version of the "Firebird," performed in 2017, most closely resembles the approach used at Artosphere. You can see the transition from a drawing to an animation at around the 0:10 mark; slowing down the video may make the replacement technique more obvious. Grégoire Pont, "The Firebird - L'oiseau De Feu – Stravinsky," YouTube, May 21, 2017, accessed February 15, 2019. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WZ9oOK7EXrg

the programs are carefully choreographed and meticulously planned. In order to achieve the effects Pont requires, he must lay out the events of the animation at least as carefully as Beethoven prescribed the notes of the score. The liveness of the drawings that lead into the animations thus resembles the realization of a score.

A final significant point about Cinesthetic is its express status as a method of audience development. The bio on Pont's personal website states that he aims to make classical music "more popular and accessible to children by means of animation."[89] Pont's emphasis on accessibility works to decrease the barriers of entry to the appreciation of classical music, a common goal for classical music performers and aficionados in the twenty-first century, when classical music is often understood to be in a position of precarity.[90] But other portions of his website insist on the respect with which he treats the music, and on the cartoons' ability to help the audience focus on "the colours and shades of the orchestra."[91] These impulses towards respect and accessibility reflect the difficulties Pont faces in navigating the world of twenty-first century classical music: despite the institutionally defined differences between these goals, Pont must achieve both to please the various elements of his target audience.

Pont's version of the "Pastoral" symphony interacts in complex ways with both the program of the symphony and the environmentalist themes of the Artosphere Festival. Since no recording of the event has been made available at the time of writing, I will provide here a summary of the plot of Pont's "Pastoral" as it was performed in Fayetteville last June. In the first

[89] "Grégoire Pont—Bio," accessed February 15, 2019, https://web.archive.org/web/20190215205314/https://www.gregoirepont.com/bio

[90] Tina K. Ramnarine, "The Orchestration of Civil Society: Community and Conscience in Symphony Orchestras," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 20, no. 3 (Fall 2011), 328-329.

[91] "Grégoire Pont—Concerts," accessed February 15, 2019, https://web.archive.org/web/20190215211231/https://www.gregoirepont.com/on-stage

movement, a little boy bird with an underdeveloped set of tail feathers attempts to improve his appearance and attract a mate. Though the first lady bird he sets his sights on prefers a bird with fuller tail feathers, a second lady bird pursues him, and by the end of the movement they are united in avian matrimony. The second movement—in Beethoven's program, the Scene by the Brook (*Szene am Bach*)—now centers on a series of animal families settling down to sleep. As woodwind birdcalls bring the movement to a close, the colors gradually change from cool purples to the reds of a sunrise. The third movement depicts a second love triangle, this time between two cavemen and one cavewoman, the first human figures to appear in the animation. In a contrast to the first movement, the primary character is here able to win over the woman from his more physically-impressive rival with the help of his sick dance moves.

Then, as the storm of movement four begins to gather, a lightning strike sets the caveman's club on fire. As the newly-minted couple stares at the flame in wonder, a silent-film-style intertitle appears and introduces text to the animation: "Oops." Then, as the dramatic storm begins, skyscrapers begin to emerge from the ground like stalks of corn. The sky darkens with pollution rather than clouds, and plastic in the oceans threatens the lives of fish. This apocalyptic turn in the narrative prompted my sister, who accompanied me to the performance, to make what may be the first comparison between Beethoven's Sixth Symphony and Philip Glass' score to the film *Koyaanisqatsi*.[92]

As the fifth movement opens, we return to the character who in the third movement was a caveman. Here he appears as a beleaguered office worker consigned to a cubicle where his sole exposure to greenery comes from potted office plants. As our protagonist walks home against the

[92] Marianne Pratt, personal communication, June 19th, 2018. This conversation occurred as we were exiting the concert hall after the performance of the Sixth. *Koyaanisqatsi* is a film that depicts high-speed footage of urban centers, hence the comparison to Pont's version of the Symphony's fourth movement.

stopped flow of rush-hour traffic, he sees a billboard proclaiming that "Pastoral National Park" is "1 hour from here." After taking a bus to this idyllic retreat, he stands beneath a tree. A falling sock alerts him to the presence of a woman—the same woman from the third movement—in a treehouse above him. He ascends a ladder to her treehouse, and they stare into the sunset while the bird from the first movement lands on a branch above them, bringing the Cinesthetic program to a rounded close.

As should by now be clear, Pont overwrites the program of Beethoven's symphony quite drastically to make it more relevant to twenty-first century listeners. The first three movements replicate familiar tropes from classic cartoons, effecting precisely the increase in accessibility that his method aims for. However, his introduction of an explicitly environmentalist theme in the fourth movement drastically alters the affect not only of his own narrative but also of the symphony as a whole. The logic of the progression from cavemen discovering fire to urbanization and environmental crisis places the blame for this crisis squarely on human invention and industry. That this progression is underlined by a highly marked textual interjection implicates language and writing also in this decline. The office building of the fifth movement places the narrative and the critique specifically in a late-capitalist context; the decision to name the protagonist's idyllic escape after the symphony causes the piece, and perhaps all music, to appear as a heterotopic, isolated, and atavistic spaces of retreat.

I can imagine two ways to interpret the role of Pastoral National Park in Pont's version of the Sixth. The first places the park in the Romantic tradition of the escape to nature—the very trope of early tourism in which the original program of the symphony indulges.[93] The warm timbres and major-key tonality of the symphony's final movement make this reading highly

[93] Schmenner, *Die Pastorale,* 1-2.

plausible. It is difficult to hear the final movement of Beethoven's Sixth and not to read it as a happy ending. But my second interpretation cannot be easily ignored, and especially not in reference to a performance taking place in the Walton Arts Center. I also read the protagonist's flight to Pastoral National Park as a temporary retreat and an empty gesture. The shocking apocalyptic gestures of Pont's fourth movement and the critique of late-capitalist urbanity in the first part of the fifth are still ringing in the audience's ears as the happy ending unfolds. The protagonist flees to a pastoral idyll, but the environmental and societal crises are still starkly evident in the symbols of the traffic he walks against to reach the billboard and the bus that he rides to reach the park. His flight changes nothing; it only introduces the distance necessary to forget that the problem continues to exist.

The explicit identification of this idyllic escape with Beethoven's music introduces another layer to this critical reading. It suggests that the act of listening to Beethoven is also an act of escape, an unconscionable disavowal of responsibility for the state of the world. The only way that the placement of this critique within the Artosphere festival, with its symbolic environmentalist programming and corporate sponsorship, could be more trenchant is if the protagonist worked not in a cubicle, but as a cashier. Under this second, more critical reading, Pont's "Pastoral" becomes a powerful but clandestine method of immanent critique, a forceful aesthetic statement masquerading as audience outreach. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that his approach was controversial among the attendees of the concert.

A "travesty of the 6th": Reacting to Walmart's Beethoven

This particular concert was billed not only as part of the Artosphere festival, but also as one of the Walmart-subsidized 10x10 concerts, a season-long initiative of the Walton Arts Center. In this frame, it participated in the signature ritual of that series: a joining-together of

audience and performers in the mutual evaluation of the concert. This took place during a catered reception in the main lobby of the concert hall using sticky notes distributed to the audience for that purpose along with their programs. These notes provide a largely-anonymous glimpse into the immediate reception of the concert by its attendees.

Many of the comments on the notes, including several from authors who identified themselves as young children, were distinctly positive. One loquacious author drew on aesthetic rhetoric positioning classical music as humanism extraordinaire to state their reaffirmed confidence in the human species (Figure 2.4).

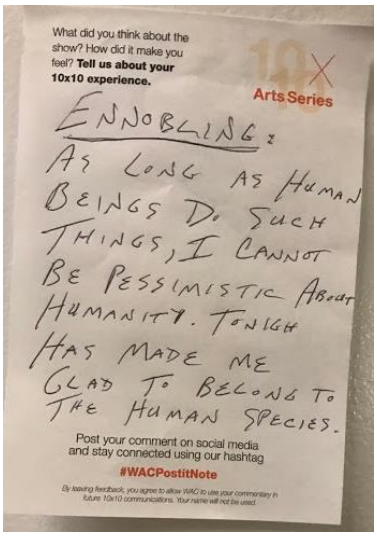

Figure 2.4 The text reads: " ENNOBLING: AS LONG AS HUMAN BEINGS DO SUCH THINGS, I CANNOT BE PESSIMISTIC ABOUT HUMANITY. TONIGH [sic] HAS MADE ME GLAD TO BELONG TO THE HUMAN SPECIES."

Two others offered exactly the kind of hope for the future of classical music that the participants in the concert likely hoped to inspire. One was an enthusiastic endorsement from a nine-year-old child who looked forward to attending more concerts; the other suggested Cinesthetics might be "the future of classical music" (Figure 2.5).

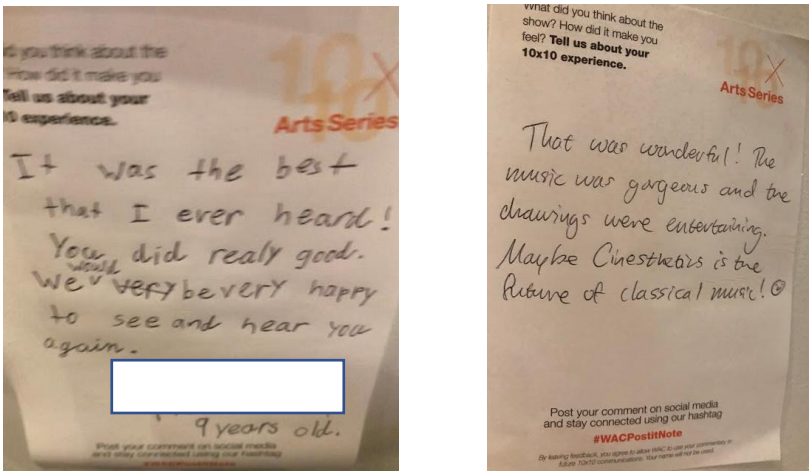

Figure 2.5 The text of the left note reads: “It was the best that I ever heard! You did realy good [sic]. We ^would very be very happy to see and hear you again. [Name withheld], 9 years old.” The right note reads: "That was wonderful! The music was gorgeous and the drawings were entertaining. Maybe Cinesthetics is the future of classical music! :)"

Several other attendees expressed measured enthusiasm for the concert but were disappointed by the fact that the Cinesthetic projections required the orchestral players to be left in the dark, essentially invisible to the audience (Figure 2.6).

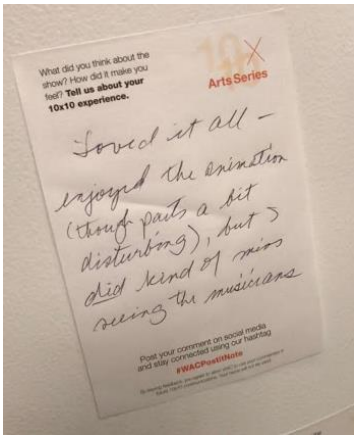

Figure 2.6 The text reads: "Loved it all--enjoyed the animation (though parts a bit disturbing), but I did kind of miss seeing the musicians".

The notes expressing negative comments, however, stood out to me as well as to the musicians who read the notes during the reception and discussed them with me. These comments ranged from the simplistic (Figure 2.7, left) to the pedantic. One note admonishing that Beethoven should not be “coarsened into sentimental kitsch” was particularly memorable (Figure 2.7, right).

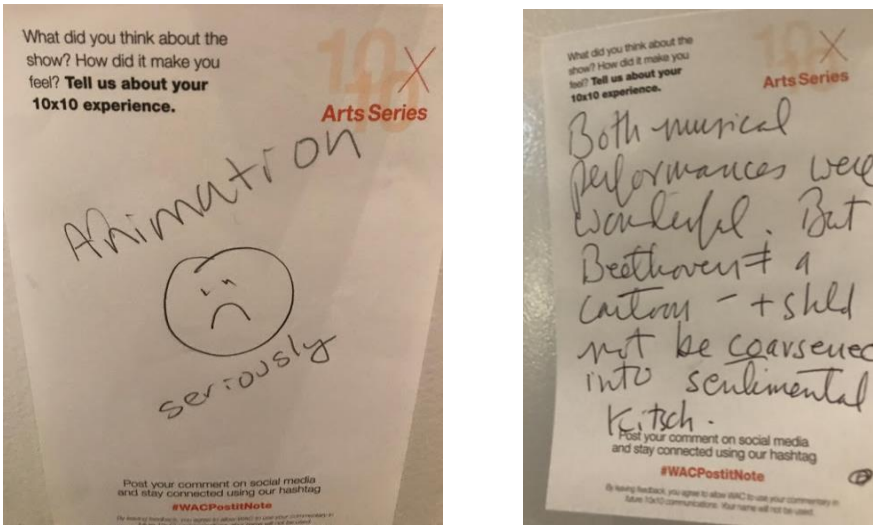

Figure 2.7 The text of the left note reads: "Animation :(seriously". The right note reads: "Both musical performances were wonderful. But Beethoven =/= a cartoon-- + shld [sic] not be coarsened into sentimental kitsch."

Some of the notes are critical to the point of being rude, looking down upon the performance for its attempt to broaden the reach of the music. One patron ended their complaint with the curious phrase "Hello Millenial" [sic], implying an ageist judgment. Still another called the performance "horrible—a travesty of the 6th," going on to proclaim that "Cute and Beethoven do not go together" (Figure 2.8).

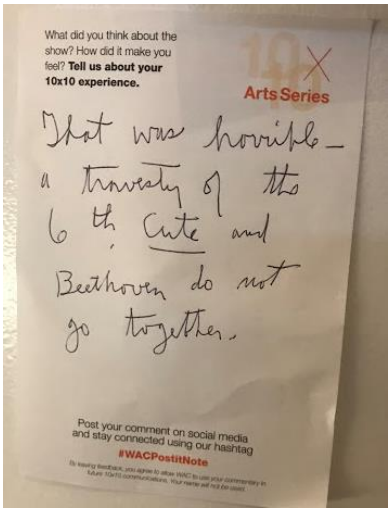

Figure 2.8 One of the sticky notes applied to the columns of the lobby after the Beethoven concert. The text reads "That was horrible—a travesty of the 6th. Cute and Beethoven do not go together."

Each of these notes works in its own way to attack those elements of the cartoon interpretation that render it more accessible—those elements that work to break down the image of Beethoven, the intangibly great composer. Cartoons "coarsen" his music into "kitsch"; they are a concession to the philistine, media-saturated "Millenial" generation; they are a "travesty." The authors of these notes all react against the contradictions they sense between the greatness of Beethoven and the commodified, one-size-fits-all frame of popular culture. In short, they are reacting against the Walmartization of Beethoven.

But where one concertgoer saw a travesty of one sort, I saw another: a travesty in the sense of *en travesti*, a change of clothes that results in a change of identity, of meaning; it produces a distantiation from the familiar Beethoven we all think we know. But it is significant that the clothes the symphony has changed into were bought and paid for by Walmart. This is the travesty of Beethoven in Walmartland—for, when a tradition of music-making that has bound up its value with social exclusivity, elitism and privilege, that ekes out a living on flagging state support and dwindling philanthropy; that struggles to adapt itself to increasingly frequent and drastic shifts in technology and culture turns to corporations like Walmart to survive, the consequences for the self-definition tradition may be immense.

Conclusion

This concert, with its incredible musicianship, inspired re-creativity, and even its pointed critique, would not have been possible without the support of Walmart and Northwest Arkansas' other private and corporate philanthropists. The concert hall itself highlights this inescapable fact: the chandelier hovering above the lobby echoes a plaque on the wall below recognizing the donors who "lit the way" (Figure 2.9). In Northwest Arkansas, Walmart is literally keeping the lights on for classical music.

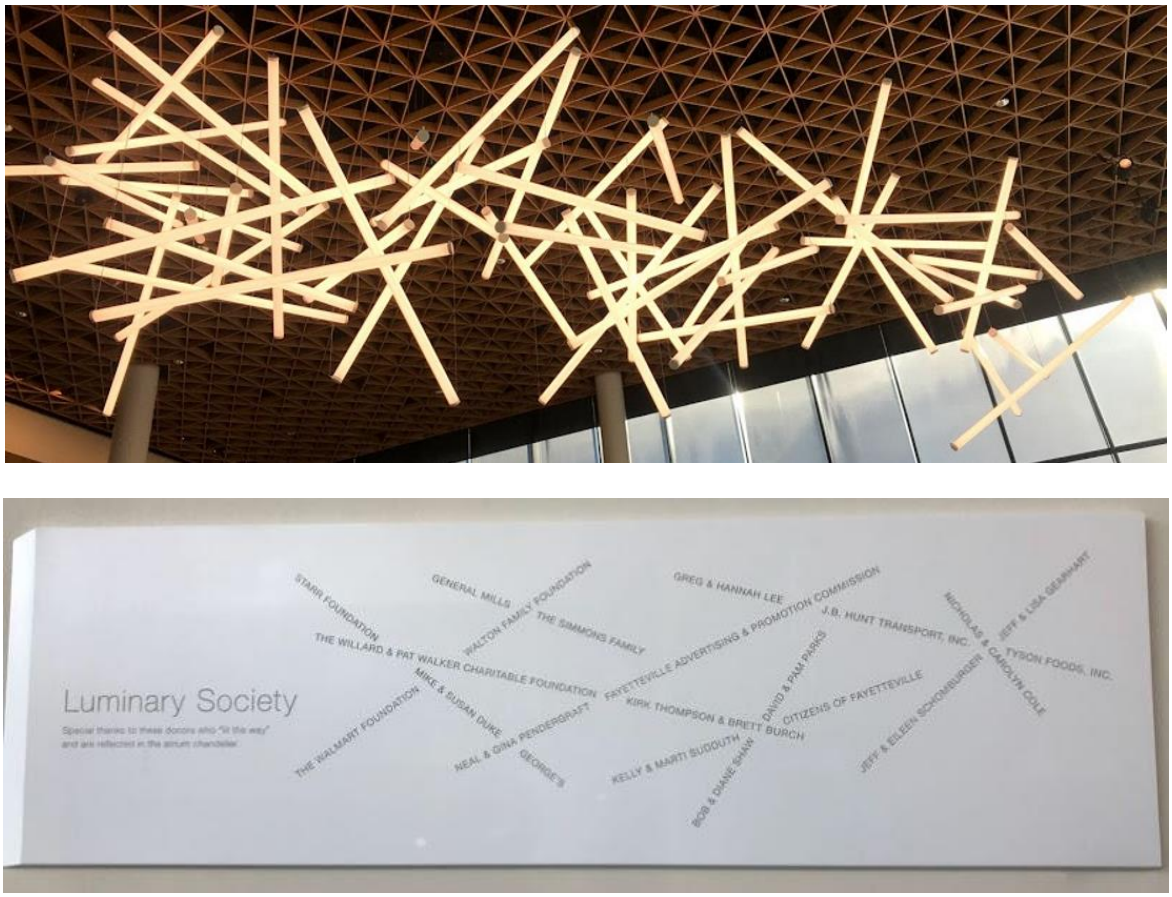

Figure 2.9 The chandelier of the Walton Arts Center's lobby and its translation on the plaque below.

But at the same time, corporate sponsorship of the event, with all of the implications of complicity with neoliberal propaganda and marketing schemes that such a relationship entails, inevitably casts a shadow over the artistic and economic intentions of the artists, potentially subverting the messages of the works, new and old, that such events present. Pont's environmentalist "Pastoral," for instance, becomes more subversive under this lens, because it critiques the kind of urbanization and sprawl that Walmart supports and enables despite its appearance in a concert, a festival, and a concert hall underwritten by Walmart's money. But at the same time, his message is cheapened because it both extends Walmart's project of making itself appear innocuous, beneficial, and even artistically adventurous to the residents of its

hometown while also functioning as an essential part of a spectacle that reinforces capitalist structures.

There may be broader implications here for American classical music in the twenty-first century. The fact that corporate sponsorship here produced an innovative and accessible festival suggests that the model might offer a new paradigm for classical music, a paradigm that may certainly help keep the tradition alive into the twenty-first century. But the aesthetic, ethical, and even ontological consequences of such sponsorship may fundamentally alter the state and the status of classical music in America. If business models like Artosphere become more common, if the future of classical music lies in soliciting sponsorship from corporate entities, if dressing in Walmart's clothes is the best way to move the tradition forward, then these travesties, at once constructive and tragic, fraught and productive, will only grow more widespread.

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